



# DOG BODY LANGUAGE

*Lots of people talk to animals.... Not very many listen, though.... That's the problem.  
Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh*

## Communication is the Key

The secret to any great relationship is communication. In order for learning of any sort to take place there must be communication on both sides i.e. between the teacher and the student. This is true whether you are teaching a human or an animal. If you cannot communicate with your dog then how can you expect to teach him anything? Having said this, surely in order to communicate effectively with your dog, it would be advantageous to learn a little of his language. Knowing simple things such as when your dog is confused, anxious, bored or stressed will unquestionably help your efforts to communicate with him.

When communicating with one another dogs use a variety of sophisticated signals to convey their intentions. This language is universal and all dogs understand no matter where they are from. Problems often occur when dogs are robbed of interactions with other dogs as puppies and do not learn their native language from the outset. Other times puppies are socialised with dogs that ignore their attempts at communication, they quickly learn that language does not work. This is where miscommunication occurs between dogs and trouble starts.

A little known fact is that often use the same signaling, or body language, to communicate with humans. Misunderstandings often transpire because humans do not understand this language. The good news is that we can be taught to read and comprehend dog language.

Just like mastering any spoken language, learning to read dog language takes experience, time and practice. To understand body language it must be interpreted in context and read in conjunction with other signals the dog is giving at the time. Subtle details must also be noted, for example a wagging tail can indicate several things, depending upon the way in which it is wagging. A slowly wagging tail can indicate uncertainty while a wildly wagging tail can indicate excitement rather than pleasure.

## Dog Calming Signals

Norwegian Dog Trainer, Turid Rugaas has studied dogs for many years throughout the course of her work and is believed to be one of the world's foremost experts on canine body language.



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Her research has helped trainers and owners the world over develop deeper understanding with their dogs. Turid has identified what she terms 'Calming Signals' in dogs. There are visual cues that dogs use to calm themselves or something/someone else in the environment. Calming signals are used as a way of avoiding conflict.

Some signals are listed below:

## Play Bow

The simplest and easiest to read signal is the 'Play Bow' (*pictured right*). Dogs often use this signal to convey their intention/request to play. The play bow can often be used to diffuse tension (often called calming signals) also. This occurs in much the same way a human will act silly to lighten up a stressful situation.



## Greeting Bow

This signal is much the same as the play bow however to give a greeting bow your dog's paws will be outstretched in front of him. He will appear to be stretching with his bum in the air. You will normally see this signal first thing in the morning, when you come home from work or after a period of absence. Dogs will normally only signal a greeting bow to another animal that they are closely bonded to (yes, humans are animals too!). This is as close as your dog gets to telling you that he loves you!

## Yawning

Sometimes your dog is tired or has just woken up and he yawns, just as humans do. However, sometimes the yawn (*pictured right*) is an important communication signal. Dogs yawn to convey stress and to calm others and environments down. When a yawn is accompanied by an audible sound (I call it the yip) is almost always stress related, i.e. he's trying to calm something or someone down, including himself. You will often see this type of yawn when a child hugs a dog. Dogs are not comfortable with children hugging them.



## Grin

Often called a submissive grin, dogs pull the corners of their mouth up and back exposing their teeth.

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They use this signal as a calming signal or appeasement signal. I have seen people hit their dogs for this signal thinking the dog is baring its teeth. Even if it were, hitting it is likely to cause more problems!

## Head Turn

Dogs try hard to avoid conflict and the head turn is often used to do just this. Your dog will use a head turn as a calming signal. You see this a lot when you are angry or threatening to your dog. This is his way of telling you to clam down. If you are not sure what is bothering your dog, look closely at what he is turning away from. That will be the source of stress. Head turns can be very obvious or may even be as subtle as just a diversion of the eyes.



## Slow Movement

When your dog feels threatened or worried he will deliberately slow his movements down. Again, this is another calming signal. This is often seen when you call your dog to 'Come' in a way that is perceived as threatening by your dog. He will deliberately slow his movements down in an effort to calm you before he reaches you. Of course, if you don't understand canine body language, you may think he's coming slowly to annoy you.

## Curving

Curving is also a calming signal. Ever noticed your dog curve into a banana shape when you are angry with him? He's trying to calm you down! When dogs sniff bum (a polite doggy greeting!) they walk in circles around each other, this is curving also. Many owners do not understand curving and force their dogs into being greeted by a dog coming straight for them, straining at the end of the lead. In this situation you should support your dog and walk him away from the impolite dog in a curve (large semi-circle). In the picture above the Chihuahua is curving as well as turning his head.



## Freezing

Often dogs will completely freeze when worried or threatened. You will often see this at the entrance to a dog park (off leash area). Your dog will often have his lead still attached as you enter the gate, several other dogs will approach and your dog may begin to feel threatened. At this point your dog's flight, fight or freeze instincts kick in.



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Flight (escape) is impossible since he is on lead, fight is usually the last option dogs employ so freeze is what he does instead. The other dogs may read this signal and leave him alone. If not, your dog may be forced to escalate into distance increasing signals such as growling or lunging to get his point across to the other dogs. I have seen many owners punish their dogs (who are still on lead) for growling or lunging at this point. It is important to understand that this is self-defence and your dog should not be punished for it. Actually, as a leader you should have stepped in before this point to support your dog. You could have removed his lead allowing for flight or blocked the other dogs' path to your dog.



### Lip Licking or Tongue Flicking

This signal is very common and is used by almost all dogs. Many owners insist their dogs do not give this signal while I am watching them do it! This signal happens briefly, often in quick lizard-like movements of the tongue and you need to be watching for it. It is often accompanied by a head turn. This is your dog again telling you to calm down. My dog does this when Daddy cuddles him too tight! Tongue flicking is also often seen in photos of dogs, because pointing a camera at some dogs makes them uneasy.



### Paw Lifting

This is often used as an appeasement signal when a dog feels unsure about its surroundings or interactions with other dogs or humans. It is also used to convey friendliness. You will often see your dog use this signal when you have something it wants – such as a piece of toast or a favourite toy.



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