

Dog Body Language Cheat Sheet

Dogs talk with the whole body, and no single part means anything on its own. Read the ears, eyes, tail and mouth together, in the context of what just happened – then check the bottom of this page.

Ears

- **Neutral, loose.** Carried where that breed's ears normally sit. Nothing going on.
- **Forward, stiff.** Interest or alert – pointed at whatever has their attention. Not friendly or unfriendly by itself.
- **Flat back against the skull.** Fear or appeasement. Pair it with a low body and a tucked tail and the dog wants out of the situation.
- **One forward, one back.** Genuinely undecided. Give them a moment.

Eyes

- **Soft, blinking, looking away.** Relaxed, or politely defusing. Looking away is a courtesy, not disobedience.
- **Soft eye contact, held.** Affection or a request. The warm one – see our *Why Does My Dog Stare at Me?* guide.
- **Hard, fixed, unblinking.** A warning, especially with a still body. Stop what you're doing. Don't stare back.
- **Whale eye – whites showing in a crescent.** Stress. The head is turned away but the eyes are locked on. Back off.

Tail

- **A wag is arousal, not friendliness.** It says something is happening, not that it's good.
- **Loose, low, whole back end going.** Genuinely happy to see you.
- **High and stiff, fast small wag.** Tense and aroused. Often the one people misread as pleased.
- **Tucked under.** Fear or appeasement.
- **Still, held out straight.** Assessing. Something has their full attention.

Head tilt & mouth

- **Tilt while you talk.** Associated with processing something meaningful – the dogs who tilt most are the ones who know the most words.
- **Loose open mouth, soft lips.** Relaxed. The "smile" is just an unclenched face.
- **Mouth shut tight, lips pulled forward.** Tension. A dog who was panting and suddenly isn't has just changed their mind about something.
- **Lip lick or yawn with no food and no sleep.** Stress signals, not manners.

The order it usually comes in

Dogs escalate predictably, and every step is a request for space. If the early ones get ignored often enough, dogs learn to skip them – which is how a bite looks like it "came out of nowhere." Respect the first ones and you rarely meet the last ones.

looks away → lip lick → yawn → turns head away → walks away → freezes → stiffens & stares →
growls → snaps → bites

Stop and get help

- **Never punish a growl.** It's information. Punish it and you remove the warning, not the feeling.
- **Stillness plus a hard stare** over food, a toy, a bed or a person. Stop, create distance, and call a qualified behaviorist.
- **A head tilt that won't go away** – or comes with head drift, circling, or unsteadiness. That's vestibular, not cute. Vet today.
- **Body language that changed recently** for no clear reason. Sudden behaviour change is a medical question first.

Read the whole dog, not one end of it.