

DOG BODY LANGUAGE

What is your dog communicating?



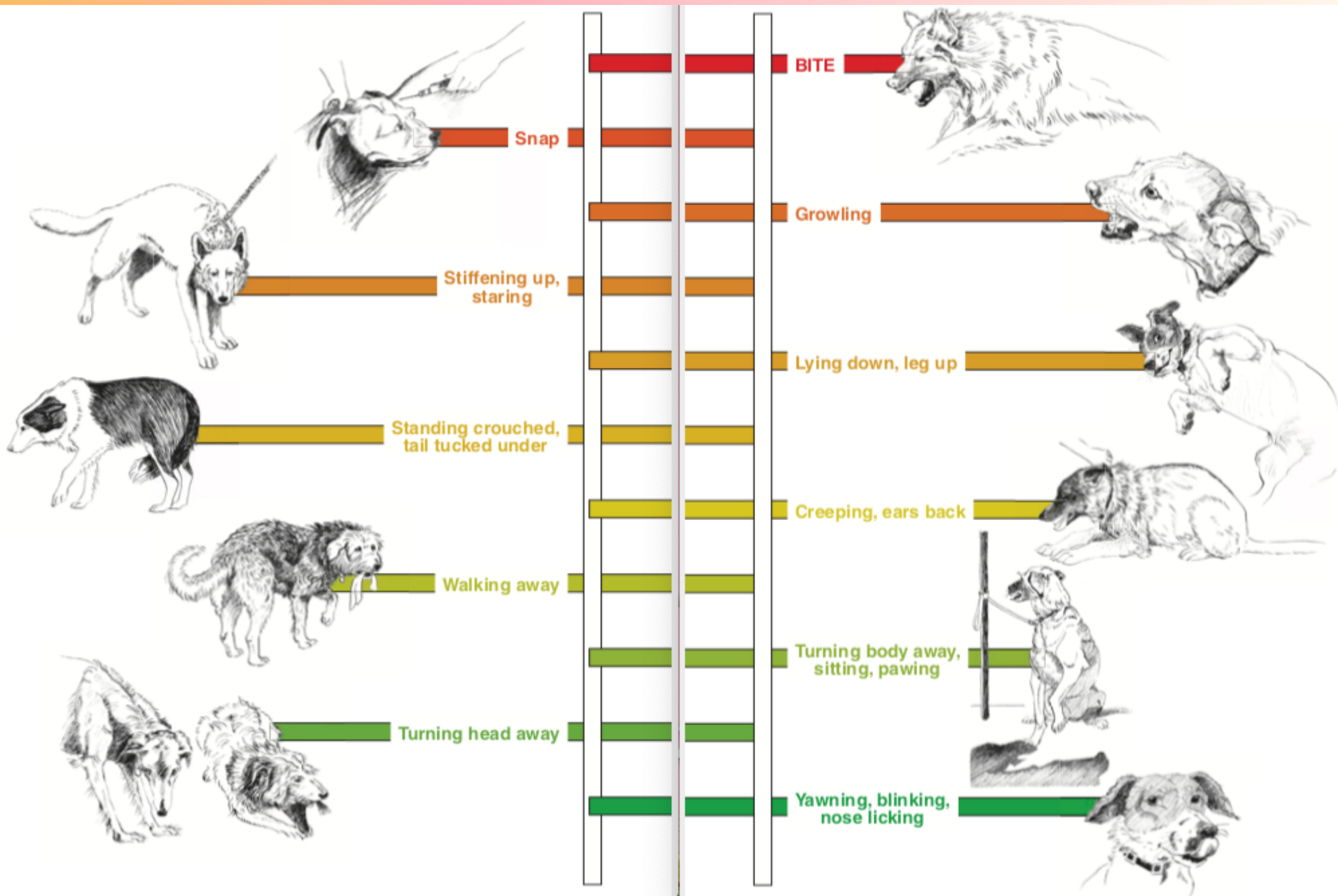
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LADDER OF COMMUNICATION

How a dog reacts to stress or threat



Source: Shepherd, K in Horwitz D & Mills DS, (2009) BSAVA Manual of Canine & Feline Behavioural Medicine

LADDER OF COMMUNICATION



How a dog reacts to stress or threat

Being aware of dog body language is a necessary skill for any guardian to enable you to understand what your dog is trying to 'say' (communicate with their non-verbal language).

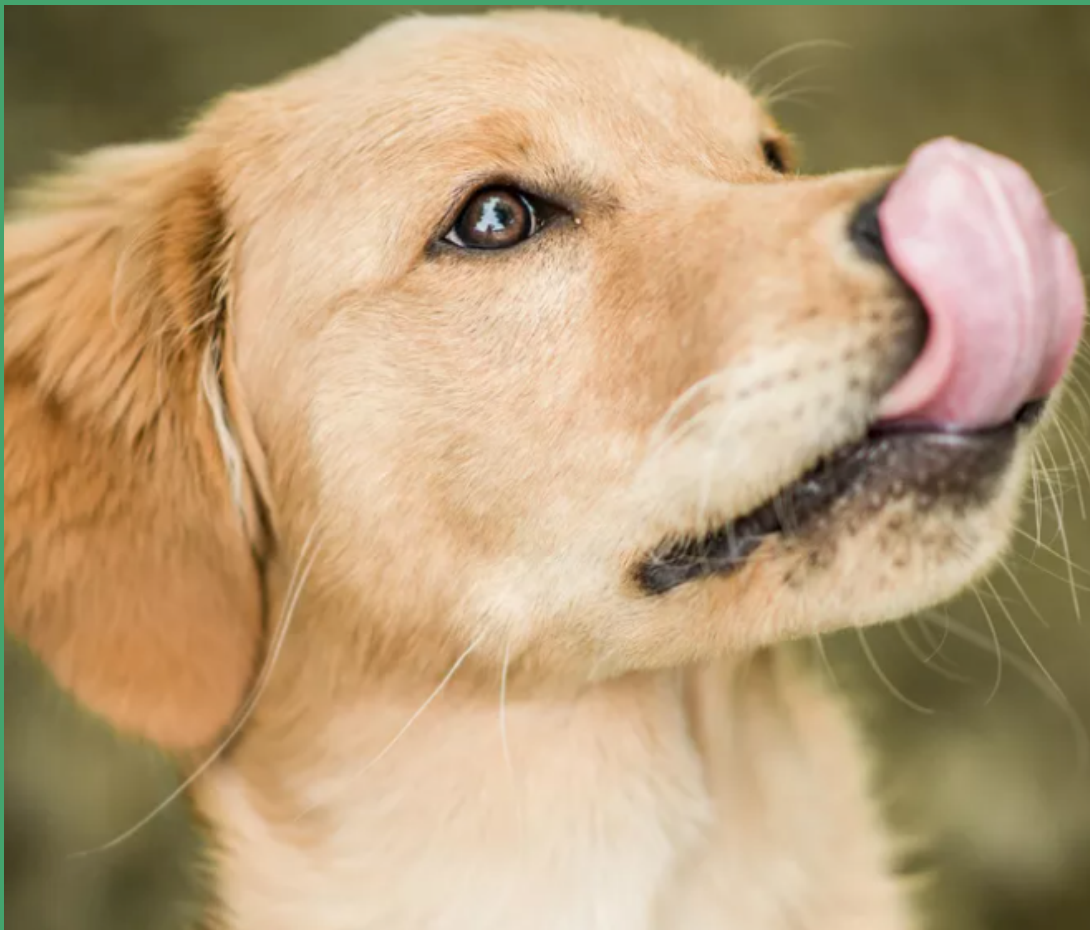
If you felt like you weren't being listening to, you might be tempted to raise your voice to try and be heard and our dogs are no different. If they aren't heard when they are 'speaking' quietly (the green zone), they will 'raise their voice' (the yellow zone) and if we still don't listen they will be forced to 'shout' (the red zone).

In the following pages there will be some examples of dog body language using the same colour scheme as this ladder.

As our dog's advocate and source of support we can increase our skills of observation, so that they don't need to shout.

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Blinks, yawns, licks nose



LADDER OF COMMUNICATION

Blinks, yawns, licks nose



These can occur in a split second and you may not notice them.

Take note of the context in which they occur, if your dog yawns when they are all snuggled up and sleepy, it is a simple yawn, but if they yawned as another dog approached or if you touch them in a certain place then it is communication as well as a decompressor.

Studies have also shown that dogs can show contagious yawning where they yawn on seeing you yawn.

Similarly if they do a nose lick because you are holding a tasty treat in front of them then it is not a sign of stress. Dogs will often do nose licks when you go to take a photo and it is the camera that picks this up, or if you lean over the top of your dog

With blinking note whether your dog is blinking faster or slower than usual.

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Turns head away, whale eye



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Turns head away, whale eye

If your dog turns their head and averts their eyes to the left or right yet the rest of the body remains stationary, this is them saying, they need a break or they feel concerned. By averting their eyes with a head turn they are communicating that they are not a threat. The dog in the photo is also doing a nose lick.



If your dog turns their head while keeping their eyes focused on a trigger, this communicates a high level of stress or fear - you'll see the side of their face and the whites of their eyes.



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Turns body away, sits, paw lift



The paw lift can be used in several situations, so it is important to read the other body language. In the left photo the dog has sat and is also doing a head turn indicating their concern. The paw lift is in preparation in case they need to move quickly.

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Turns body away, sits, paw lift



In this photo the white dog is uncomfortable with the close approach of the other dog, as evidenced by the paw lift, ears straight out, tense face with their eyes averted and the stiff, raised tail.

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Paw lift in anticipation



Paw lifts can also be a positive sign and used in anticipation of play or food.

If your dog is looking at you holding a treat with a wide open mouth and relaxed body language, whilst doing a paw lift it is probably anticipation, as in this photo of my dog.

His eyes are fixed on what I'm holding.



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Walks away, backs away



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Walks away, backs away



Your dog may show one or more of four typical responses to stress, known as the four Fs. Fight, Flight, Freeze or Flirt.

Fight is the last thing they want to resort to, hence it being at the top of the ladder, they are more likely to try the other 3 first. Flight where your dog tries to avoid a situation is shown here. They may look away, hide, try to move away or flee a situation. If your dog can't escape when they need to, their Flight response can turn into Fight.

Freeze, where your dog stops moving or responding is sometimes misread as calmness, because the dog is not reacting, but a dog in Freeze will have fixed body language and is unlikely to be able to take food.

The final F is Flirt or Fool Around, where your dog plays the fool. Your dog may lower their body and put their ears back. They may wiggle a lot and wag their tail rapidly. This can be misinterpreted as friendliness, but they are actually concerned. My dog will flirt when he thinks he is going to have a bath, he will pick up the towel or a toy and play with it.

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Body lowered to ground, ears back

By lowering their bodies they are making themselves as small as possible.



The dogs in these photos are clearly displaying fear, with wide eyes, furrowed brows, closed mouths and ears back tight against their head.

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Ears back, flattened tongue



Sometimes the signs can be more subtle with just a small movement of the ears going back or a slightly lowered body.

Get to know your dog's various ear positions so that you can learn to recognise the subtle differences.

The dog in this photo also has a flattened tongue known as a spatulate tongue, which is a further indication of the stress they are feeling.



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Tucks tail under, crouches



Crouching is a more subtle sign of the body lowering. The dog on the right is leaning his whole body backwards, indicating he doesn't want to move forward. The dog on the left has a tightly tucked tail.

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Tucks tail under, crouches



Note the various positions that your own dog's tail adopts when they are playing, walking, eating, encountering new experiences. The majority of dogs tuck their tail when they are unsure or afraid but some dogs such as greyhounds and whippets naturally tuck their tail and it is not a sign of fear, but their normal carriage.

A wagging tail is not always a sign that your dog is happy or friendly. A happy wag is usually a big circle, a 'helicopter' tail, accompanied by a loose, wiggly body.

Most dogs, when on high alert, will hold their tails high and stiff and often show very fast tail movement. Some dogs may swing their tails very low and slow when they are unsure or nervous. If they have a naturally curly tail, it may uncurl or it may go flat against their hind-end.

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Lies down, leg up



Not all dogs who lie down and show you their belly are inviting you to scratch it.

It may be because they are feeling unsure, wishing to show they are not a threat or lifting their leg up as if to push you or the threat away.

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Lies down, leg up



You may see the leg come up as you reach in to scratch their belly, in this scenario they are communicating that they don't want you to touch them. The dog on the left is flirting/fooling around to communicate their needs. The dog on the right looks very unsure and is another example of taking notice of all the body language, not just one part in isolation.

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Stiffens body, stares



This may be a freeze as previously discussed, so that they are hopefully not noticed by the threat or they may stiffen just before they bark or lunge. Both of these dogs have a fixed stare with tension/anxiety evident in their faces.

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Growls, agonistic pucker



LADDER OF COMMUNICATION

Growls, agonistic pucker



The first signs of the Fight response is when your dog barks, growls, and lunges. It does not have to be actual fighting, but includes any active response intended to move another dog or person away.

The first sign the mouth will often do is to tightly close and the corners of the mouth extend backwards.

The agonistic pucker where the skin above the nose wrinkles and the teeth become visible can be accompanied by a growl or can occur alone and be completely silent. This is a strong warning to whatever is approaching whether that be another dog or a human. You would usually see other body signals as well such as a forward position, hard stare, rigid stance and stiff and upright tail.

Many guardians may be tempted to punish the growl, but this will often stop the dog doing this warning, so they will miss out this step completely and potentially go straight to biting.

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Snaps



Dogs snap at the air in the direction of the threat. They do not miss by accident and it is a precisely placed warning.

The dog in this photo is clearly showing they do not want the hands to approach, physically pushing them away with their paws, visible teeth, ears back, body leaning away and wide, frightened eyes.

This is their last warning before they are forced to bite.

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Air Snaps



The photo on the right looks scary, but is an example of where knowing the context of the situation is vital.

It is snapshot in time of my own dog as a 2 year old, air snapping at hovering bees, which are just out of reach.



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Bites



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Bites



The top of the ladder is when the dog actually bites. There will have been many other signals prior to the bite, as previously discussed.

There are several levels of biting from a muzzle punch, slight scratches, shallow puncture wounds to deep puncture wounds.

Young puppies will bite as they explore with their mouths and it is important to address this early on. If you have a new puppy and would like help with biting or any other aspect of puppy rearing - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/puppy-love>

Adolescent dogs who are still learning to control their emotions may nip, mouth and bite when they become over-aroused as can other dogs who struggle with over-arousal. If you would like help with an over-aroused dog <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/countdown-to-contentment>

SOME HAPPY CONTENTED DOGS



They have relaxed body postures, crinkly eyes, loose open mouths, lolloping tongues and almost look like they are smiling!





DO YOU NEED ANY SUPPORT WITH YOUR DOG?

Please join my Facebook group which as well as being a place of support has lots of free information.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1202003626934051>

If you are struggling with a reactive dog who barks and lunges on the walk and would like some help with this - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/working-with-reactive-dogs>

If you have a new puppy and would like help with puppy rearing - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/puppy-love>

If you would like help with an over-aroused dog - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/countdown-to-contentment>

Dogs, like us, need enrichment in their lives, if you want to understand how to provide this - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/enrichment-for-your-dog>

If you want to have a calm, relaxed walk, but you are having difficulty achieving this - <https://contented-canines.newzenler.com/courses/loose-lead-walking>