

Dog Body Language Chart

Read the whole cluster of signals in context — never just one. Learn the calming signals, and when your dog looks tense or conflicted, give space.

The golden rule: read your dog as a whole. Look at the ears, eyes, mouth, tail and posture together, and always in context — what's happening around them right now. One signal alone means little; the same wag can be friendly or tense. Read the cluster.

EARS	
Neutral	Relaxed and at ease; nothing has grabbed their attention yet.
Forward / pricked	Alert and focused on something; interested, not yet good or bad.
Pinned back / flat	Worried, unsure, or appeasing; often fear or stress.
Out to the sides ("airplane")	Uncertain or conflicted; watch the rest of the body.

MOUTH & FACE	
Loose / soft, maybe open	Relaxed jaw, easy pant; content and unbothered.
Closed & tense	Mouth suddenly shuts; something just worried them.
Lip lick / yawn (out of context)	Mild stress or appeasement when not tired or eating.
Lips lifted / teeth	Clear warning; back off and give space now.

BODY & POSTURE	
Loose / wiggly	Curvy, relaxed body; safe and comfortable.
Weight forward / stiff	Standing tall, leaning in; aroused or confident — caution.
Crouched / low	Making themselves small; fearful or unsure.
Frozen still	Sudden stillness; a serious signal — stop and give space.

EYES	
Soft / almond	Calm and comfortable; blinking normally, no tension around the eyes.
Hard stare	Fixed, intense focus; a serious warning — do not push.
"Whale eye" (whites showing)	Whites show as they turn away; stress, feeling trapped.
Looking away / squinting	Avoiding conflict; a polite request for a little space.

TAIL	
Neutral	Held in the breed's natural resting position; relaxed.
Loose wag / whole body	Soft, sweeping wag with wiggles; usually friendly and relaxed.
High & stiff / fast flag	Tense arousal, not joy; can come before a bite.
Tucked / low	Fear, worry, or submission; feeling unsafe.

CALMING SIGNALS

Lip licks, yawns, looking away, slow blinks and a lifted paw are calming signals — a dog's polite way of saying "I'm a little stressed, let's slow down" (popularized by Turid Rugaas). They aren't misbehavior; never scold them. Ease the pressure and give your dog a moment.

WHEN TO GIVE SPACE

When stress signals stack up — or you see any warning like a hard stare, whale eye, freeze, stiff body, growl or lifted lip — stop, give space, and remove whatever is worrying your dog. Never punish a growl: it's honest information, and silencing it only removes the warning before a bite. Most bites follow signals people missed.

SOURCES

AVSAB (Humane Dog Training, 2021) · ASPCA · AVMA (dog-bite prevention) · Dr. Sophia Yin · Turid Rugaas (calming signals) · Kendal Shepherd (ladder of aggression, BSAVA)