



# Dog Communication: Ears, Eyes, Tail, and More

*Tips from H.O.P.E. Animal Rescue*

## Eyes:

When looking at a dog's eyes, pay attention to the white part of the eye (called the sclera). When a dog is feeling tense, their eyes may appear rounder than normal, or they may show a lot of white around the outside of their eyes (this is sometimes referred to as a "whale eye" like shown in the picture to the right.) Dilated pupils can also be a sign of fear or arousal- which can make their eyes look "glassy". These are signs that indicate a dog is feeling threatened, stressed, or frightened.

**DID YOU KNOW:** *a relaxed dog will often squint so that their eyes appear more almond shaped with no white showing at all (like the Labrador on the right)*



## Mouth:

A relaxed dog (like this Labrador) will often have their mouth open and may even be panting, with no facial or mouth tension. In fact, the corners of their mouth may be turned upward slightly.

A fearful or tense dog will generally keep their mouth closed and may pull their lips back at the corners (sometimes referred to as "long lip"). They may be panting rapidly; but if they close their mouth suddenly, this may be a sign of increased stress. Look for drooling, especially if there is no food present, as this can be another sign of fear or stress.

## Physical Warning Signs:

If a dog is trying to display warning signs, they may start to wrinkle the top of their muzzle and pull their lips up vertically to display their front teeth. This is called "offensive pucker" and often comes with a tense forehead, hard eyes, and growling. The Doberman was displaying those physical signs when standing over a bone, which means they are warning anyone that may approach their bone.



Some dogs may display a "submissive grin" or "smile" as seen in this picture. This is a gesture that a dog will show with their front teeth. A dog will usually show a lowered head, wagging tail, flattened ears, a soft body posture, and squinty eyes. This is the same Doberman as above, she dances around greeting her favorite person. Notice her almond shaped eyes, with no glassiness and no white showing at all.

**TEETH DON'T ALWAYS MEAN AGGRESSION** *□ it is important to consider the whole body and the context of the situation to understand what your dog is saying.*

*Yawning and lick licking are signs of stress, particularly when accompanied with a tight mouth and a whining sound (as seen in this picture to the right).*



## **Ears:**

Dogs have a large variety of ear types. Although it may be easier for us to see ear position in dogs with erect ears, even floppy-eared dogs like Basset Hounds can move the base of their ears forward and backward to show different emotions.

When a dog is relaxed, their ears may be slightly back or out to the sides; but as a dog becomes more aroused, the ears will move forward, pointing toward a subject of interest. **DID YOU KNOW:** *when a dog's ears are most forward, their foreheads often wrinkle.*



## **Tail:**

When observing a dog's tail, there are two things to consider:

- 1: the position of their tail
- 2: how the tail is moving

A relaxed dog holds their tail in a neutral position, extending it out from the spine (the middle picture below), or may be below spine level. The movement may be a loose wag from side to side or a sweeping circular motion. As the dog becomes more excited/aroused, their tail usually rises above spine level (picture to the right). As they become more aroused, the dog may hold their tail high with little movement, or they may move their tail side to side in short, rapid movements.

A fearful dog will tuck their tail between their rear legs (as seen in the first picture below). They may also hold their tail rigid against their belly or wag stiffly.



## **Hair:**

Much like a human's goosebumps, dog's hair can raise along their back when they are upset or aroused. This is known as piloerection or "raised hackles" and can occur across the shoulders, down their spine, and above their tail. Hackles don't always mean aggression, but they are an indicator



that a dog is excited or upset about something. **DID YOU KNOW:** *a frightened dog will shed more than usual.*

### **Sweat:**

Dogs pant to cool themselves off, but did you know, panting can be a sign of stress; particularly if rapid panting is accompanied by a tight mouth with stress wrinkles around it. **DID YOU KNOW:** *Dogs have the ability to sweat through their paws.*

### **Overall, Body Posture & Movement:**

When initiating play, dogs often start with a play bow and generally follow up with exaggerated facial and body movements. A playful dog's body movement will be loose and wiggly, while a dog who seems stiff or continues to back away, may indicate that they may not be interested in social interactions. Looking away, sniffing, scratching, and laying down are all signs of avoidance behaviors and may indicate that the play session is over.

A fearful dog may lean away, lean back, tremble, crouch, lower their body or head, or roll onto his side or back. Often, a dog's eyes will be fully open with large pupils, their forehead will be wrinkled, and their tail will be lowered or tucked. An extremely fearful dog may freeze completely or frantically try to escape or they may urinate or defecate when approached.

A dog displaying aggressive body language will look large, standing with their head above their shoulders. Their body will be tense, with weight either centered or over all four feet or leaning slightly forward onto the front legs. (*Learn more in our Reading Canine Body Language Tipsheet.*)