

Decoding Canine Body Language Quick Reference Guide



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When approaching an unfamiliar dog, officers should take note of six different characteristics—eyes, ears, mouth, tails, fur, and overall posture—and alter their behavior based on those characteristics.¹

Eyes

When approaching a dog, an officer should take note of both the size of the dog's eyes and the direction of its gaze. Generally, larger than normal eyes indicate the dog may be feeling threatened or frightened and should be approached cautiously. Smaller than normal eyes, or eyes that appear to be squinting, are usually nonthreatening and could indicate the dog is frightened or in pain. As for the direction of its gaze, some dogs may look directly at an individual without any threatening or challenging intent; however, when that direct stare is accompanied by noticeably tense facial features or body language, officers should proceed cautiously and not look directly back at the dog. Looking away does not mean an officer surrenders his dominance, but is a way for the officer to appear less threatening. If the dog looks away, it may also be attempting to appear less threatening—though looking away could also indicate the dog is scared of interacting with humans, and officers should be wary of any additional signs of aggression. Lastly, officers should be cautious when a dog looks at them from the corners of its eyes to an extent that most of the whites of the dog's eyes are visible, particularly if the dog appears to be guarding something or someone; this usually indicates an imminent act of aggression.



1. American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, "Canine Body Language," https://www.aspcapro.org/sites/default/files/canine-body-language-asPCA_0.pdf.



Ears

There are generally five positions at which a dog may hold its ears. If a dog appears to be holding his ears naturally with no visible tension or distress, it is generally relaxed and nonthreatening. If the ears are held high on the head, it signals that the dog is alert to what is going on around it; often the ears will also be pointed toward whatever is alerting the dog. While this alert stance is not generally an indication of a threat, officers should be cognizant of how they approach an alert dog, as the dog could respond aggressively. If the ears are held up and forward, this is an indication that a dog is feeling aggressive, and officers should be cautious when approaching. When the dog's ears are pulled back, this is an attempt by the dog to communicate friendliness or a nonthreatening attitude. Lastly, if the ears are completely pulled back against the dog's head, it indicates either fear or submission. This is a signal to proceed cautiously, as frightened dogs may act aggressively out of fear.

Mouth

The positioning of a dog's jaw and lips, and how prominently it displays its teeth, are all behavioral cues as to its attitude. Friendly and approachable dogs typically will have a relaxed mouth, closed or slightly open; any display of teeth is incidental to the dog's mouth being open. Frightened dogs, too, will have a closed mouth, but they may also stick their tongues out or lick, or they may pull their lips back in what looks like a grin. These are all indicators that the dog is acting submissively and is not intending to be a threat towards anyone or anything. An aggressive dog, on the other hand, will usually display its teeth to some extent, sometimes accompanied by a wrinkling of the muzzle or growling. Officers who notice this positioning should approach cautiously, if at all.

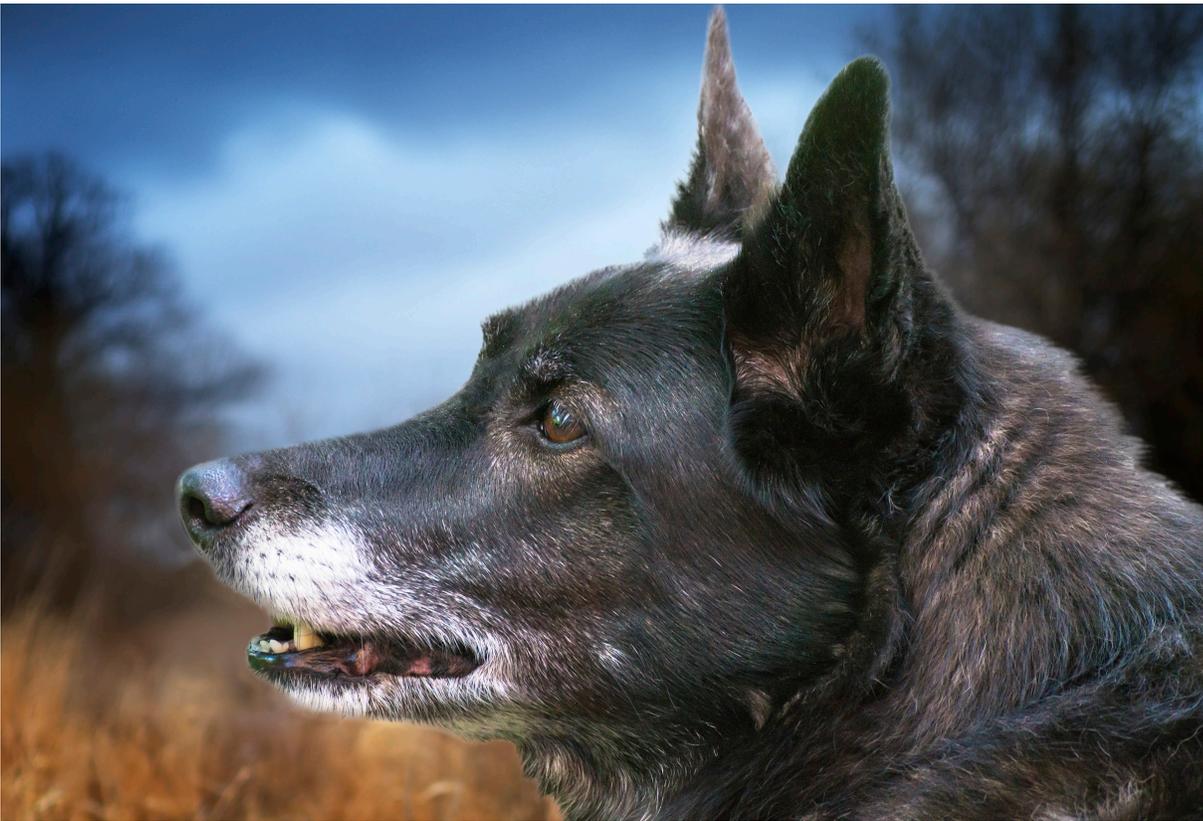


Tails

It is a mistaken assumption that a wagging tail always indicates a friendly dog. Aggressive dogs may wag their tails, and friendly dogs may not wag their tails at all. Additionally, some dogs, such as Boston terriers, don't have much tail to wag, while breeds such as greyhounds have a tail naturally positioned in a way that may be interpreted as frightened. In general, however, a wagging tail often does indicate friendliness or fear. Friendly dogs will gently wag their tails side-to-side, or more forcefully if the dog is excited. Frightened dogs sometimes tuck their tails between their rear legs; the closer to the belly of the dog, the more frightened it probably is. When a dog holds its tail high *and* appears to wag it tensely; this indicates aggression or dominance. An officer should interpret the positioning and movement of the tail in combination with the other factors to get a better indication of how the dog is feeling.

Fur

A dog's fur may not be much of a method of communication, but officers should take precautions when they notice the fur along a dog's spine and in between its shoulder blades is raised or sticking up. This is an indication that the dog is frightened, nervous, or aggressive. If the dog's fur is raised, officers should approach slowly and cautiously and observe the dog's other traits to determine whether it is afraid or angry.



Overall posture

Dr. Stanley Coren, a psychologist known for his research on dog behavior, presented the eight most relevant and useful dog postures in an article for *Modern Dog*. These are relaxed and approachable, alert, dominant and aggressive, fearful and aggressive, stressed and distressed, fearful and worried, extremely fearful, and playful.² Learning these simplified postures allows officers to make a quick assessment of any potential threat posed by the dog.

For more visual references, please visit <https://www.sheriffs.org/Decoding-Dogs>.



2. Stanley Coren, "How To Read Your Dog's Body Language," *Modern Dog*, accessed April 15, 2019, <http://moderndogmagazine.com/articles/how-read-your-dogs-body-language/415>.

The use of force by law enforcement, deadly or otherwise, has become a major issue before the public. As human cases have become more visible, so have cases where law enforcement officers have used deadly force against companion dogs.

The purpose of this quick reference guide is to provide law enforcement agencies and officers with the information and tools necessary to handle dog encounters, starting with understanding canine body language. This quick reference guide is part of *Law Enforcement Dog Encounters Training (LEDET): A Toolkit for Law Enforcement.*



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