

# About Face

*Learn what your dog's facial expressions may mean – and how to interpret them in context.*

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**T**here is great value in having a solid understanding of canine facial expressions and their accompanying body language and behavior. The following are some of the more common canine communications offered by those very expressive furry faces. Keep in mind, though, that when drawing conclusions about a dog's facial expressions, it's important to factor in the rest of the body language in order to get the whole message.

Add this lexicon of canine facial expressions to what you already know about canine body language and you may be able to qualify as an expert dog listener. It just might have a positive influence on your relationship with your own dog. It may enable you to interpret for humans who haven't yet learned to understand what their dogs are saying. It really is quite a useful skill to have.



## Eyes

A dog's eyes, like a human's, are capable of conveying a multitude of meanings and emotions. Here are common eye expressions:

### SOFT EYE CONTACT

This is a dog who is social, confident and friendly. The eyes are round or almond-shaped and soft, with the pupils dilated appropriately for available lighting (small pupils if light is bright, large if light is dim). Often accompanied by affiliative (distance decreasing) behavior such as a relaxed tail wag, and body curved or even wiggling.

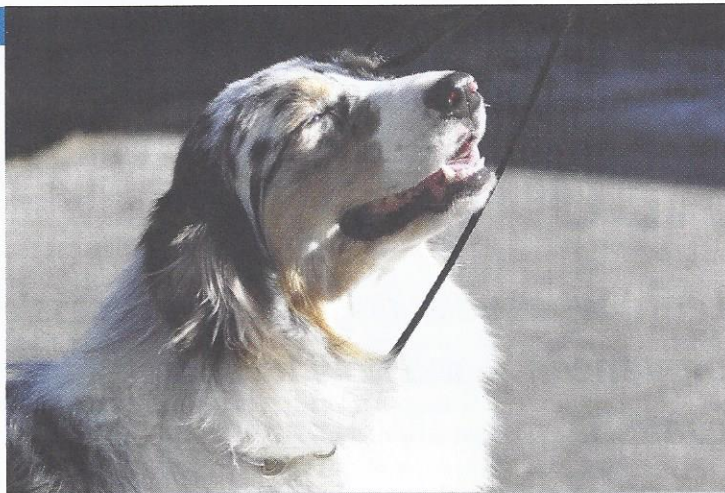


### HARD EYE CONTACT

This is a hard, direct stare which, if you are good at reading dogs, gives you the chills. It is not friendly. The eyes are piercing, and there is often little or no body movement. Accompanying body language is usually assertive – dog is standing tall and forward, tail erect and still or wagging stiffly. May be part of a pre-aggression “freeze” where the dog goes completely still. If this warning is ignored, the dog is likely to bite.

## SQUINTY EYES

This is a sign of appeasement, which is often a good thing, if it is simply the dog's nature to be appeasing. However, appeasement can also be a signal for fear, which is not such a good thing. If the dog is squinting and approaching, it's a friendly, social expression, and it is probably safe to interact with him. If the dog is squinting with his body posture back and lowered, it is likely fear. If you approach he may feel threatened, and bite.



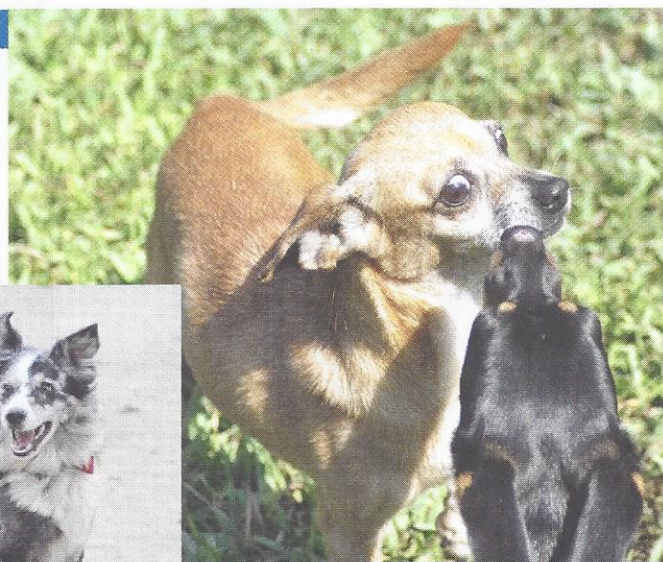
## AVOIDING EYE CONTACT

While the human species prizes direct eye contact as a measure of someone's character and honesty, in the dog world, direct eye contact can be perceived as a threat. Often, unless a dog has been strongly reinforced for making and keeping eye contact, he will look away when you look at him. It's a deference behavior – his way of saying he doesn't have any desire to challenge you. He's doing his best to be polite and non-confrontational. Unfortunately, humans often perceive a dog as being sneaky if he won't look them in the eye – a totally off-base interpretation of a very sweet canine trait. If you want your dog to make eye contact with you more, avoid body language that suggests to him he needs to defer to you, and spend lots of time reinforcing him for looking you in the eye.



## WHALE EYE

This is a dog trainer term for when a dog shows the whites of his eyes. While it is often a warning sign and precursor to a bite, it really just means the dog is looking sideways while his nose is pointing forward. It is often seen with resource guarding because the dog is keeping his nose pointed at the valuable resource while watching you to gauge how much of a threat you are.



Again, the rest of the dog's body language is key to knowing when whale eye is an aggression signal and when it is not. If the body is relatively still and forward, it's aggression. If other body signals indicate relaxation and play, then it is likely not aggression.

# Ears

A dog's ears are like semaphore flags – they send clear signals to anyone who knows the code. Fortunately the dog ear code is considerably simpler than semaphore. A dog with dropped (droopy) or (heaven forbid) cropped ears can be harder to read, but the signals are still there:

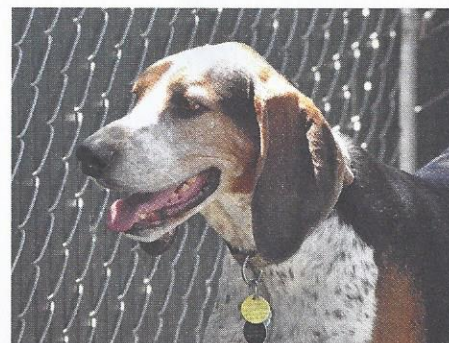
## EARS PRICKED HARD FORWARD

This is a dog who is aroused and alert. The ears alone don't tell you if it's excited-happy-aroused/alert or aggressive-aroused/alert. If the eyes are soft and the body is wiggly, it's the former; if the eyes are hard and the body is tense, it's the latter.



## EARS RELAXED

For a prick-eared dog, the ears are still up and forward, but not hard forward, and may even swivel to the side. For a drop-eared dog, the ears are hanging flat against the side of the face instead of pulled forward. Relaxed ears generally mean a relaxed dog.



## EARS PULLED BACK

Regardless of ear style, ears that are pinned back against the head can mean one of several things. It can be happy appeasement, fear, or stress. As with the squinty eyes, the rest of the dog's body language will give you clear clues as to which it is for the dog in front of you, and you can adjust your own interaction with the dog accordingly.



# Mouth

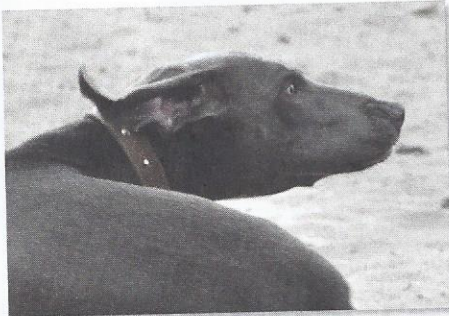
## RELAXED

Your dog's mouth, when relaxed should be closed, or slightly open. If closed and relaxed, the skin around the mouth will be wrinkle-free, with possible exceptions for the wrinkly and brachycephalic (short-faced) breeds.



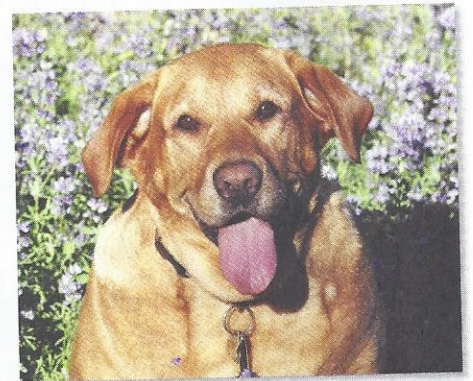
## TENSE

If your dog's mouth is relaxed and open, and he slowly closes it, his body goes still, and there are lines around his mouth, he is not happy. Use caution, especially if his body also goes still. This is often part of the freeze sequence that is the precursor to a bite.



## OPEN, PANTING

A dog can pant for several reasons. He may have just been exerting himself, and is panting to cool off. He may be overheated, in which case emergency cooling measures are called for to prevent heat stroke or even death. Or he may be stressed. Again, evaluating the rest of his body language, as well as knowing what activities he's been recently engaged in and taking into account the ambient temperature, will help you determine which panting is happening. Also, acute stress and distress panting is often very fast and shallow, as opposed to relaxed panting which is often slower and deeper.



## LICKING

Sometimes dogs lick to greet. Sometimes dogs do appeasement licking. Sometimes dogs lick their lips to get the last bits of flavor from the last tasty thing they ate. Sometimes dogs lick themselves persistently because of allergies or some other medical issue, or because of a canine compulsive disorder. And sometimes dogs lick their lips because they are stressed. Sometimes canine professionals have a tendency to over-react and call any lip-licking stress licking. It's not necessarily. It might be. Let the rest of the dog's body language help you decide if it is or it isn't.

## YAWNING

Sometimes dogs yawn because they are tired. Sometimes dogs yawn because yawning is contagious. Sometimes dogs yawn because they are stressed. Again, look at the whole dog – and then decide.



## SNARL

As clumsy as some people are at reading canine body language, this one is pretty hard to miss. When the lips curl up and all those shiny white fangs are exposed, the message is usually pretty clear. The snarl is usually accompanied by very hard eyes, while the ears may be pricked hard forward or pinned back, depending on whether the dog is being offensively or defensively aggressive.



## COMMISSURE

This is just a fancy word for the corners of your dog's mouth. Take note of how the commissure looks when your dog is calm and relaxed, and remember it for comparison purposes. There are two significant variations on the commissure. If the corners are pulled forward and the commissure forms a "C" shape, the dog is being offensively aggressive. If the corners are pulled tightly back, forming a "V" shape, the dog is being defensively aggressive. Either way, watch out!



## SUBMISSIVE GRIN

Often mistaken for a snarl, the submissive or appeasement grin is a bit of a mystery in canine communication. It is only seen very rarely in dog-dog interactions, but is not uncommon for dogs with soft, appeasing personalities to offer to humans. One theory is that the dogs are actually mimicking human smiles! At any rate, it's a lovely behavior that can get dogs in trouble because people think they are being aggressive when they most certainly aren't. If you're not sure, quickly check the rest of the dog's body language to clues as to which it really is. I say "quickly" because if it really is a snarl, prompt evasive action may be required on your part.



PHOTO BY CARRIE ALLAN

# Facial Muscles

You probably never gave much thought to the fact that a dog's face has muscles – but of course it does. Without them, dogs would be unable to create all the adorable facial expressions that we love so much – as well as the ones that aren't so cute. You know what the cute ones are. There are a couple of places where facial muscles create tension lines, and these are the ones you want to watch out for.

## LACK OF BROW LINES (CALM)

A calm, relaxed dog's brow is as smooth as a baby's bottom (again, with those wrinkly-dog exceptions).



## BROW LINES (STRESSED, WORRIED)

A worried or stressed dog will have ridges over his brow, and lines around his eyes.



## MOUTH LINES

You can also see tension in the lines around your dog's mouth. A relaxed dog's lips are flat and wrinkle-free. 🐾



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## DON'T OVER-ANALYZE

Post a photo or video on YouTube of a child interacting with a dog and watch the flood of comments from canine training and behavior professionals. More than likely, most of the comments will be critical of dog owners' apparent inability to read canine facial expressions and communications, and trainers will be aghast at the obvious risk to the child in question.

"Look at the dog yawn! OMG, he is obviously so stressed! Oh look, the dog looked away. That child is about to get bitten! How irresponsible those parents are!"

Amazingly the child survives the encounter, and you can envision trainers cyber-shaking their heads around the world in wonder at the dog's forbearance and the miracle of the child's survival. Often, however, I shake my head and wonder if our

profession has become pathologically hypersensitive to perceptions of canine stress communications.

Granted, there are some YouTube videos that make me gasp in horror as well, like the recent one where a child was encouraged by his parents to jump repeatedly on the ribs of a laterally recumbent (and incredibly tolerant) Rottweiler. And granted, many preventable bites do happen because a dog's signals of discomfort are ignored by children and adults alike.

I can't help but think there is a middle ground. After all, dogs didn't co-evolve with our species over the millennia due to a lack of tolerance for bizarre human behavior. Rather, they seem to love us despite our tendency to do things to do things that would cause some other animals to give us a wide berth!