

Reading Canine Body Language and Safer Handling Tips for ASA Volunteers



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Reading the Dog as a Whole

(These are helpful questions to ask before approaching the dog)

- Wiggly or stiff overall body posture?
- Frontally aligned or positioned somewhat sideways?
- Does this dog make the hair on the back of your neck go up or are you ready to cuddle (honestly, this is important your internal reactions can inform your interaction)?
- Eyes soft and squinty or are the whites of eyes showing ("whale eye"), or a hard stare with marble-like look to eyes?
- Tail carriage high or low? Wagging stiffly or loosely or 'helicopter tail'?
- No signs of friendliness or wanting to connect with you?
- Furrowed brow?
- Ears- carriage, position and movement
- Weight forward or back; dog on tiptoes?
- Where is the dog choosing to be located in the kennel when you approach?

Face talk:

Assessments

1) Eyes

How to look for dilated pupils—**don't look into dog's eyes**

Whites of eyes showing (aka whale eye).

2) Forehead

Furrowed brow, worried look (other than associated with squinty eyes)

3) Ears

Carriage (up or down, forward, back or rotated to show inside of ears), movements, changes (note differences in cropped ears)

4) Mouth

Commisure forward or back, canine smile, offensive pucker, teeth showing, teeth showing while barking

Mouth held open or shut, tongue spatulate, drooling, panting

Growling, snapping at air, snarling

Tail Talk:

Assessments:

Take in the full picture of how the dog carries its tails. Is it held high over its back or low or tucked? Look closely at how tail is wagging. Is tail stiff at the base? Note the height of the tail and if it is cropped. Note the tail's position and movement relative to the overall picture and face talk. Note that different breeds have different default tail carriages.

Dogs' Reactions to Interactions with Handlers

These can be categorized into distance decreasing or distance increasing behaviors and positions relative to you are good indicators that the dog is welcoming (and we hope is enjoying) contact with you or that they are being stressed or are uncomfortable with the interaction.

- Please remember that these guidelines are very contextual; consider the setting, the stressors and distractions the dog is experiencing and that you're looking at snapshots rather than the sum total of the dog's nature or temperament.
- How dogs may interpret our body position often depends on our approach: Are you leaning or reaching over them, upright versus crouched, frontal versus sideways?
- Where are you touching the dog?
- What is the setting and surrounding environment?

- What is the dog's history, both daily notes from staff and volunteers and during kennel stay and if stray or owner surrender?

- If playing with a toy, are you tossing it at them or past them- slow or fast?

Calming signals-these can often indicate internal levels of stress or comfort and are common to most, but not all dogs-remember to always note the context and environment

- Splitting up
- Sniffing the ground, grooming and other displacement behaviors
- Yawning
- Stretching
- Turning the head sideways
- Licking the lips

NOTES

Suggested best practices for volunteers once you have used the above criteria to assess the dog's behavior and body language:

- Taking the dog out of the kennel and attaching the leash—read body language before, during and after.
- Holding the leash and navigating from kennels to exercise yard or street
- Leash walking
- Playing
- Petting
- Calm interactions
- Learning games
- Returning the dog to the kennel
- Working as a team with another volunteer
- Emergency protocols for off leash dogs (yours or other), suspected aggression toward you
- Volunteer notes

Arousal and impulse control and arousal recovery

Let's discuss putting reading canine body language skills and safer handling techniques.

NOTES