Reading Canine Body Postures

While dogs cannot speak, they do display their state of mind via their body language. By taking careful note of ear position, pupil dilation, facial tension (particularly around the muzzle and forehead), tail carriage and body weight distribution, an observer can detect whether a dog is relaxed or fearful.
Cat Body Language

The confident cat: The confident cat purposefully moves through space, standing straight and tall with tail erect. He is ready to explore his environment and engage those he meets along the way. His upright tail signifies his friendly intentions, while his ears are forward and erect adding to the cat’s alert expression.

The confident cat at ease: When relaxed, a confident cat stretches out on his side or lies on his back exposing his belly. He is in a calm but alert state and accepts being approached. His entire posture is open and at ease; but beware, not every cat that exposes his abdomen will respond well to a belly rub. Some will grasp your hand with their iron paws, rake your forearm with their hind feet and bite your hand.

Distance-reducing behaviors: Distance-reducing behaviors encourage approach and social interaction and are meant to telegraph to others that the cat means no harm. The act of rubbing against a person’s hand or another cat (scent marking) to distribute glandular facial pheromones from the forehead, chin or whisker bed is calming and seems to guarantee friendly interaction immediately afterward. The tail is usually held erect while the cat is scent-rubbing.

Distance-increasing behaviors: The goal of distance-increasing behaviors is to keep others from coming closer. Aggressive interactions are avoided when the warnings are heeded. Conflicted cats lack the confidence to stare down and charge others. Instead, they assume a defensive threat posture, warning others away by appearing as formidable as possible by arching their backs, swishing their tails, and standing sideways and as tall as possible. Fear and arousal causes their fur to stand on end (piloerection) and pupils to dilate.

The anxious cat: When a cat becomes anxious, he crouches into a ball, making himself appear smaller than usual. Muscles are tensed and the cat is poised to flee if necessary. The tail is held close to the body, sometimes wrapped around the feet. The head is held down and pulled into the shoulders.

Defensive aggression: The pariah threat is another distance-reducing posture. When a cat determines that he cannot escape an unwanted interaction with a more dominant animal, he prepares to defend himself. The ears are pulled back and nearly flat against the head for protection and the head and neck are pulled in tight against the body. Facial muscles tense, displaying one weapon - the teeth. The cat rolls slightly over to one side in order to expose the rest of his arsenal - his claws. He is now ready to protect himself.

From ASPCA’s Meet Your Match
HOW TO GREET A DOG (AND WHAT TO AVOID)

Appropriate greetings are common sense. Imagine if someone greeted you the way many people greet dogs!

**Human to Human**
**INCORRECT**
- Avoid reaching into their safety zone.
- Avoid rushing up.
- Avoid interactions without asking.
- Avoid staring at people. This is scary.
- Avoid looming over.
- Avoid reaching into personal space.
- Avoid close interaction if the person is afraid of you.
- Avoid touching inappropriately.

**Human to Dog**
**INCORRECT**
- Avoid reaching in or towards the dog’s ear.
- Avoid rushing up.
- Avoid interacting with unfamiliar dogs, especially if they’re tied up.
- Avoid staring at or approaching head-on.
- Avoid leaning over or towards dogs even when you change position to squat or get up.
- Avoid reaching your hand out for the dog to sniff.
- Avoid petting if the dog looks nervous or tense. Just admire him instead.
- Avoid hugging, kissing, and petting roughly. This is too familiar and disliked by many dogs.

**Human to Dog**
**CORRECT**
- Stand a safe distance away so that you are not a threat.
- Approach slowly (at a relaxed walk).
- Ask if you can interact first.
- Approach sideways and look using your peripheral vision.
- Stay outside the dog’s bubble and present your side to the dog.
- Let the dog approach at his own rate.
- It’s OK to pet the dog if he looks relaxed, comes up to you, and solicits your attention by rubbing against you.
- Pet gently.
DOGGIE LANGUAGE
starring Boogie the Boston Terrier

ALERT
SUSPICIOUS
ANXIOUS
THREATENED
ANGRY

"PEACE!"
look away/head turn
STRESSED
yawn
STRESSED
nose lick
"PEACE!"
sniff ground
"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away

"NEED SPACE"
whale eye
STALKING
scratching
STRESSED
shake off
RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes

"RESPECT!"
offer his back
FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body
FRIENDLY
"PRETTY PLEASE"
round puppy face
"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG"
belly rub pose

"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch
"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow
"READY!"
prey bow
"YOU WILL FEED ME"

CURIOUS
head tilt
HAPPY
(or hot)
OVERJOYED
wiggly
"MMMM...."
"I LOVE YOU, DON'T STOP"

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Animal Interactions

While at the shelter, you will meet many animals. Please remember these steps when you interact with them. (These pictures are of dogs, but the information pertains to all animals.)

Ask the owner.

Ask the dog.

Don’t pet without asking.

Pet gently on the neck and chest.

Don’t pet on top of the head.

Don’t hug.

Animals are very sensitive to scents: Please use minimal scented lotions, perfumes and similar items when you volunteer.