

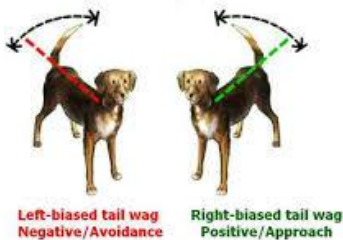


Can I Trust that Wagging Tail?

One of the most misunderstood aspects of dogs is their wagging tail. It's a common belief that a dog with a wagging tail is a "happy dog", but that's not entirely true. A wagging tail can mean "stay away" as easily as it means "come on over!" Not knowing how to correctly interpret this aspect of canine behavior can cause a lot of misunderstanding during human-canine encounters!

The main function of a dog's tail is to provide balance. They use their tail for this purpose especially when running, swimming, walking along something narrow, or when making sharp, fast turns. The tail however, is also an important communication tool. In fact, dogs will wag their tails in the presence of other animals (humans and dogs included), but not when they are alone.

To be able to "read" the language of the tail-wag, you must first know the "natural height position" of the tail, for that particular breed. This is the position displayed when the dog is completely relaxed. When a dog wags its tail back and forth from this height position, they are simply checking things out and not reacting to their environment. If the tail is held higher than the natural position, this is typically an indication of happiness, enthusiasm and confidence. All good signs! If the tail is held lower than its natural state, it may indicate nervousness, insecurity or even fear.



From that point, consider the direction and speed of the wag. A fast wag is generally a good sign, while slow or very stiff movement back and forth should be treated with caution. It's also interesting to check which direction the wag is headed. Since the left hemisphere of the dog's brain is associated with "positive-approach feelings", but controls the right side of their body, a wag to the right is a good sign! The reverse is true for a "wag" to the left, since the right hemisphere of the brain is linked with "negative-avoidance feelings." If a dog wags its tail in this direction, it is likely scared and would like to get out of the area!

The best situation to witness is a dog doing the "full body wag!" This is a loose, flowing wag of the tail, in a position just a bit higher than its relaxed state. In this case the entire "back-end," or even entire body, seems to rock back and forth as the tail wags. This typically means the dog is friendly and is happy to be approached by a person or another dog. The greater the area of the body that is engaged, the friendlier the dog!

You may have noticed the over-use of the terms "usually" and "typically" when describing how to interpret what the dog is communicating with their tail. As with most creatures, every dog is unique, even within the same breed. This makes it difficult to definitively interpret the body language of any individual dog.

It's always best to see a wagging tail only as a sign that the dog would like to interact. It doesn't however indicate the mood of the dog or what the result of that interaction will be. The safest tactic is to address the human companion and ask if the dog is comfortable with someone approaching them. This is much better than asking if the dog is "friendly", since even friendly dogs can get scared or nervous. If the dog is open to an interaction, then it's your chance to shower the pooch with praise and pets, and really get that full-body-wag going!