

Learn to Talk Dog

Sarah Whitehead

My dogs 'talk' to me all the time. I'm sure yours do too.

Dogs and humans have a long history. We have hunted together, played together and enjoyed each other's companionship for centuries. We understand each other well and have an almost intuitive way of being able to interpret each others' communication systems. All this, despite being two different species who each speak a completely different language.

Canine communication systems are disarmingly similar and yet different from our own. This is a double-edged sword, because on the one hand it means that we 'read' emotions in dogs based on their body language and facial expressions very well. However, it also means that we have a tendency to assume that all their communication patterns are the same as ours, and this can be a disaster!

The vast majority of dog owners wander this treacherous path and get away with it. Dogs are an amazing species who forgive us our attempts to communicate with them via spoken language, and are bright enough to catch on to the association between words and the body language that we ourselves display. Of course, for some people this does confirm their belief that 'he understands every word I say' – even when this is clearly not doing the dog any favours.

For those who want to take their understanding of dogs another step further, a little time and effort in 'learning canine' can go a long way. I truly believe that although handling dogs comes more naturally to some people than others, the skills needed to read and understand canine body language can be taught – and in the last ten years I have committed to designing a system to make this as easy and enjoyable as possible.

Learning any new language takes commitment, but unlike attempting to learn Cantonese in middle age, learning to talk dog is based on observation as well as emotional intelligence – something which usually improves with age in the human species! (Good news for many of us!)

Learning from my new system also requires an open mind. This is because the greatest barriers to understanding dog behaviour and body language are the pre-conceived ideas that we often bring to the subject. It's hard for many people to get to grips with the fact that tail wagging doesn't always mean happiness, or that a play bow is not always about play – but I think that one of the most important parts of building a 'canine dictionary' is to relinquish assumptions about what you have previously been told and study with fresh eyes. Hold on to your hats and be prepared for some myth busting on this course!

A picture can tell a thousand words

Twenty years ago, when I first started offering education in understanding canine body language, I relied heavily on getting students to watch dogs in real life. Now, while there is no greater thing to do to practise your observation skills (who couldn't love spending hours just watching dogs in the name of learning?), it does have its down-sides. The biggest one is that dogs are fast and humans are slow. Very, very slow, in comparison to dogs. This means that all too often, by the time a human has spotted an intention movement or a signal, the dog has moved on and the moment is past. For this reason, I have found that using video footage in lectures and workshops is great – we can then

review the action time and again to be able to spot the signals that might otherwise be missed.

This got me thinking. If I can use video as a teaching tool, with commentary to describe what's going on, then why not photographs too? Dogs Today came up trumps here and filled in the gaps in my own photo library. While photos may not have 'action' in the same way as video footage, they allow us to look very closely at a snapshot in time, and they help enormously in 'training the brain' of the person making the observations to make quick decisions on what they are seeing. This has the knock-on effect of helping people to make faster observations in real time.

The result? My new 90-day Programme, which – by the power of the internet – is an interactive on-course in how to learn to talk dog.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to know what your dog was thinking and feeling?

Although we will never know for sure, there are clues that you can learn which will help you to understand your dog much better. If you can do this, you can learn to assess and even predict canine behaviour. If you are a savvy owner, a trainer, a member of veterinary staff, behaviour specialist, welfare professional or volunteer – or just have a fascination with dogs, you will benefit from my up-to-the-minute programme – bringing to life the hidden language of dogs.

- **Benefits for owners:**
 - Avoid threats to your own dog when out walking
 - Understand your own dog in a way that others simply don't
 - Learn to predict your dog's behaviour
 - Avoid getting bitten by unknown dogs
 - Reduce stress for your dog in all situations
 - Improve your training with your dog, your bond and your relationship
 - Get off to a great start with a puppy or rescue dog
- **Benefits for professionals and students of behaviour and training:**
 - Learn the subtle secrets of dog body language that I explain only in Advanced Masterclasses
 - Up-skill and update your behavioural knowledge with state-of-the-art information
 - Keep yourself safe around unknown dogs through rapid assessment strategies
 - Educate your clients in their dogs and other dogs' behaviour
 - Assess a dog's needs with regard to behaviour and training in less time
 - Understand the 8 steps of aggression, so you can switch them off
 - Make the link between your 'gut instinct' and your head when reading dogs

Check out the site... on the home page you can take a free interactive quiz to test what you know about canine body language, and challenge your friends to see if they can do better.



www.learntotalkdog.com

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