

## If Your Dog Could Talk

A few years ago, a toy company in Japan announced the development of a dog collar that was said to be capable of interpreting a dog's barks, whines, and growls and give the owner an accurate accounting of what the dog's vocalizations meant. At the time, I thought how great it would be if it really worked! However, in case you hadn't noticed, this product is not a bestseller on Amazon – or anywhere else. The unfortunate dog owner still does not have a quick and easy path to understanding a dog's language

In the same way that learning French, Portuguese, or any other language takes time, the skills needed to understand your dog's language take time to develop. The more time you spend around dogs and the more you learn about how dogs communicate with each other, the easier it will be to understand your dog's language and, in turn, help your dog understand you. With mutual understanding, the rewards in your shared relationship will be greatly multiplied.

**Dogs display as much non-verbal language as we do and are usually more adept at reading it.**

Dogs are almost constantly communicating with us in a non-verbal language – a play bow to show submission, a pat on the hand expressing the desire to be petted, alert head and ears while gauging the potential for danger from an unusual noise. The examples are endless. Pretend you're from another country and you don't speak the language – your only method of communication is non-verbal. Then watch your dog's behavior at various times during the day and see how often he "speaks" to you in ways he believes you should understand. If you love your dog, one of the best gifts you can give him is to better understand what he is trying to tell you.

Examples of a dog's ability to read us are plentiful –sticking close to us when we don't feel well, knowing we'll be leaving when we take out a suitcase, interpreting our movement toward the kitchen as a potential for dinner. Some dogs can even sense when their owners are going to have a seizure or can identify people who have cancer. This brings us to another way dogs learn, understand, and communicate – through their incredible senses.

**Although they have the same senses we do, dogs rely on their senses differently.**

**Vision** –A dog's visual acuity (the ability to focus and see images sharply) is less than a human's. Rather than the common 20/20 vision of humans, dogs have a visual acuity of about 20/90. Their field of vision is much greater than ours, though, due to the position of their eyes, and they see five times better than we do in the dark.

While people have three types of cones in their retinas, dogs only have two. Having three cones allows us to see the world in shades of red, green, yellow, and blue while dogs only see yellow and blue. Red objects appear brown and green objects appear gray. (See illustration below.) You may think your dog will love that shiny red Frisbee, but a better choice (from the dog's perspective) would be the yellow one.



A Dog's Vision

**Hearing** – Dogs have much better hearing than we do, in both intensity and range. Dogs communicate with each other through changes in pitch, inflection, intensity, duration, and tempo. For example, a larger dog may growl in a high pitch while playing with a small dog (signalling that it's a play growl), but use the same growl in a low pitch to warn another dog to keep his distance. In the same way, we can change the pitch of our voices to better communicate with our dogs. Many dog trainers use a higher pitched voice for praise (positive feedback) and a lower pitched voice for negative feedback. You may observe this principle in action when a trainer says “Uh Uh” in a low-pitched tone to correct a dog.

**Smell** – A dog's sense of smell is so finely tuned, that a blind and deaf dog can walk into a room and navigate just fine, solely using his sense of smell. The percentage of your dog's brain devoted to analyzing smells is 40 times larger than that of a human, and experts estimate that dogs can identify smells between 1,000 and 10,000 times better than humans (depending on the dog's breed). It's very likely that, when a dog enters a room, he orients himself, not by what he sees, but by what he smells – straight ahead is the smell from last night's casserole, in the corner he had an accident 2 years ago (the scent never really went away), and a scent trail to his owner leads him to the bathroom door. Who needs eyesight with a sense of smell so precise?

**Communication and motivation are essential factors in successful training.**

To train your dog, he needs to understand what he's supposed to do and be motivated to do it.

Motivating your dog is nothing more than successfully communicating to him that he will be rewarded. All rewards, however, are not equal, and different dogs are motivated by different things. You've probably observed this principle in your dog – he's engaged in one of his favorite activities, like digging a hole or chasing a squirrel. When you call him, he ignores you. Why? Because the behavior he's engaged in is providing a more valuable reward than running to you.

To motivate your dog, it's important to figure out, not only what he likes, but also what he loves. Your dog may love cheese, a toy, getting to sniff, playing with other dogs, or riding in the car. Using these “loves” as motivators make communication and training much easier.

Let's say you're holding your dog's favorite food – baked chicken. You want him to lie down, but all he does is jump up and try to reach the food. Why? Because you haven't successfully communicated to him that lying down will give him the reward he seeks, and jumping up won't. On the other hand, if he manages to grab a piece of chicken from your hand even one time, he will be motivated to repeat it, and you're on your way to unknowingly creating an unwanted behavior.

Successful two-way communication with your dog can be learned. When you sign up for a dog training class, you may have thought the trainer would be training your dog, but in fact, the trainer will be training you. A good dog trainer assesses your goals and learning style, as well as your dog's learning style, age, past experience, and current behavior, among other factors, to teach you the best ways to communicate with and motivate your dog.

*NOTE: My apologies to all the sweet little girl dogs out there – I used the pronoun “him” to improve readability. This convention should not be interpreted as a preference toward boy dogs.*