

iSpeakDog

New website clues us in to what our dogs are trying to tell us.

By Tracy Krulik



Just as the words “there,” “they’re” and “their” sound the same but mean different things, so do many dog behaviors. When dogs growl, they may do so to ask something scary to back off, or they may do so while they’re having fun. Dogs pull on-leash to get to a happy place as quickly as possible, or they pull to get away from a threat. They

chew shoes, pillows and toys because ... well ... they’re dogs, or they chew a doorframe because they’ve been left home alone and are panicking.

In order to teach our dogs to do things such as walk politely rather than pull or chew an approved toy rather than a doorframe, we need to understand which version of the behavior we’re looking at. A front-clip harness is a great tool for

teaching enthusiastic leash-pullers to slow down, but it’s not going to help the dog who’s pulling to get away from a scary sewer grate or a toddler running straight at him.

To know which training technique to use, we need to understand the dog’s emotional state. When fear and anxiety are at the root of the problem and we can help the dog overcome them, the “bad” behavior goes away. However, being able to tell how a dog is feeling can be challenging. So, to help dog guardians learn to translate their pups’ body language and behavior, I launched iSpeakDog (ispeakdog.org) earlier this year. (Full disclosure: I’m also the managing editor and lead writer.)

The site provides a three-step “How to Speak Dog” formula to translate Dog into English, with a variety of real-world scenarios to practice using the formula. Here’s an example.

Rascal the Jack Russel Terrier has just experienced his first bully stick, and oh, was it *goood*. His



person, Max, gave it to him to keep him entertained while Max chatted with a prospective client. At the end of the call, Rascal was still on his bed, happily chewing, and Max walked over to give him a snuggle for being such a good boy.

As Max reached toward him, Rascal went nuts. He growled, snarled and snapped, scaring Max so much that he jumped back and moved to the other side of the room. He was afraid to go near Rascal for the rest of the day and needs help figuring out what happened. “Is Rascal dangerous now? I’ve never seen him so aggressive,” Max said. “I thought he loved me.”

In order to help Max and Rascal, we need to answer the questions in the iSpeakDog three-step formula:



“Whale eye”—whites of eyes exposed



Mouth is relaxed and slightly open

when they “flee,” they are moving themselves away from the scary thing.

Dogs have powerful jaws and teeth that can do considerable harm to others, but it’s not in their best interest to go around biting people or other dogs. Fighting uses up a lot of energy, and they can be hurt or even killed as a result of engaging in it. So, rather than attack, dogs employ a vocabulary of escalating warning signals to ask the threat to move away: hard stare, growl, bark, snarl, snap, and bite with inhibited force (meaning, they “pull their punch” and use reduced pressure).

If, after all of those warnings, the threat still has not moved away, a dog might then bite with full force. It’s important to note that dogs’ warning signals are very individual; some do all of

them, some do a few, some bypass them altogether and go straight to the bite.

It sounds like we might be onto something with this “response to threat” stuff, since Rascal growled, snarled and snapped when Max approached.

Step 2: What is the dog’s body language? *Rascal froze and became tense. He had lots of eye white showing, he growled, snapped, and showed his teeth.*

Step 1: What is the dog doing? (Name the exact behavior.)

Step 2: What is the dog’s body language? (Describe how the dog looks and sounds.)

Step 3: What is going on? (Describe the context of the situation.)

Once he’s answered these questions, Max will visit the “All About Dogs” page to learn about aggression and figure out Rascal’s emotional state based on the body language he described.

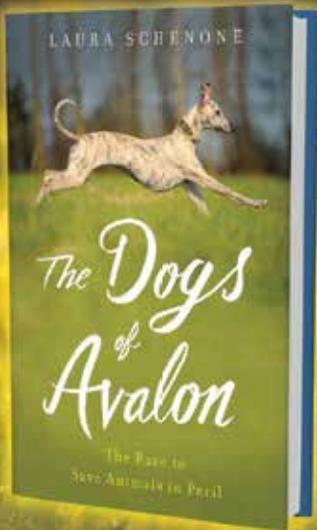
Step 1: What is the dog doing? *Rascal became aggressive when Max approached.*

On the “Aggression” page, there are links to info on “response to threat” and “resource guarding.” Let’s dig into “response to threat.”

Just like people, when dogs feel threatened, fight-or-flight kicks in. Why? To put distance between themselves and/or their food, toys, locations, and even people they love. When they “fight,” their goal is to get the threat to retreat, and

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The iSpeakDog Body Language Gallery is divided into two categories: “happy, confident and comfortable” and “distressed, scared and insecure.” On this page, Max can compare Rascal’s expression to those of the dogs in the gallery to determine Rascal’s emotional state.

Max observed that Rascal had a lot of white showing in his eyes, and was growling, snarling and baring his teeth. Is there any doubt which of the two dogs Rascal resembles?

You’ve probably already guessed that the pup on the left is in the “distressed” category, and the one on the right falls under “happy.” Like Rascal, the distressed dog has a lot of eye white showing and isn’t moving, putting him in position to fight off the threat if that threat doesn’t listen to his warnings and continues to move towards him.

Step 3: What is going on?

Rascal was on his bed eating a bully stick.

Many dogs consider their beds to be their special retreat and bully sticks to be one heck of a prized possession.



The Answer

Based on Max’s answers, it’s clear that Rascal is resource guarding, a behavior that can be traced all the way back to the wolf. In the wild, animals must protect themselves and their possessions in order to survive. While they generally don’t need it, many domestic dogs



are born with this same software package encoded into their personal DNA.

It can be incredibly frightening to have a much-loved dog growl and snap at us to “back away!” and it’s very natural to take it personally. But Max can take comfort in knowing that resource guarding is not personal; rather, it’s an instinctive response. Rascal is asking Max for more space, which is something to celebrate. He’s choosing not to bite Max, who heeded Rascal’s warnings and moved out of his reach—a wise thing to do when a dog is growling.

Twenty years ago, most people would simply leave their dog alone while he was eating a meal or working a chew toy, and today, we can do the same thing. But if there are young children in the home or you don’t want to tiptoe around when your pup has something good, you can train your dog to not only cope with your approach, but be really happy when you do so. **B**

Tracy Krulik, CTC, is a certified dog trainer and behavior consultant, and honors graduate of the prestigious Academy for Dog Trainers. She also writes for publications including *The Washington Post* and *The Chronicle of the Dog*.