

## Tail wagging in dogs

Tail wagging is something that most of us take for granted. You have a dog, it wags its tail.

Trainers who work at the community level or through commercial enterprises regularly use diagrammes like this one from Dr Sophia Yin to train others about the body and tail positions of a fearful dog.<sup>1</sup>



Tail wagging has been studied in various ways; fear is only one of the emotional states that a dog communicates through its tail.

In one limited study, researchers observed mobility assistance dogs and their tail wagging to determine if the tail wagging was part of the 'user experience'.<sup>2</sup>

In another study, dogs were shown other dogs to monitor their body language and heart rate responses. When shown either a right wag or no wag, the viewing dogs were noticeably more relaxed with normal heart rates. But, when shown a left wag, the viewing dogs exhibited higher heart rates and signs of high stress which included tucked tails, salivation, and bracing of the legs. Some would even whine or run away.<sup>3</sup>

Still other researchers want to know why dogs wag their tails in the first place when other canid species do not. Is it a trait that



A right tail wag from Maeve in her pet home

developed from domestication? That team suggested that the increased occurrence of tail wagging may have either been a by-product of selection for other traits valued for domestication, or that because humans liked the rhythmic nature of the wag, they selected for this characteristic.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, most research teams recommend more research!

A few things we do know is that understanding the basics of body language and tail wagging are important for how we approach dogs and work with them, plus how to read other dogs when we oversee dog-dog interactions.

In general, we can say these things about tail wags:

- **Tail height:** High or vertical shows confidence; low or tucked shows fear or submission.
- **Speed of wag:** Indicator of level of arousal – a faster wag is higher levels of excitement.
- **Breadth of wag:** wide and sweeping will often be a friendly dog; if tight and stiff, the dog is tense. 🐾

### References

1. Body language of fear in dogs, free poster download from Cattle Dog Publishing, [cattledogpublishing.com](http://cattledogpublishing.com)
2. User Centered Design Approaches to Measuring Canine Behavior: Tail Wagging as a Measure of User Experience, Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Animal-Computer Interaction, 4 December 2018 at <https://dl.acm.org/doi/epdf/10.1145/3295598.3295599>
3. Seeing Left- or Right-Asymmetric Tail Wagging Produces Different Emotional Responses in Dogs, Current Biology, 18 November 2013, pp 2279-2282.
4. Why do dogs wag their tails?, Biology Letters, Volume 20, Issue 1, 1 January 2024. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/rsbl/article/20/1/20230407/63446/Why-do-dogs-wag-their-tails-Why-do-dogs-wag-their>



Louie the Bull Terrier's tail wag signals to his owner that he'd like to come inside.