



COACHING CANINE
COMPANIONS

FIELD GUIDE · NO. 01

Five Signs Your Dog Is at the *Edge* of Their Window

The signals that arrive before the reaction — and what to do in the moment you catch one.

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

The Reaction Is the *Last* Thing That Happens

By the time the barking starts, the story is already over.

We describe it as a beginning — *he started barking at that dog across the street* — because that is the moment it became loud enough to notice. But no nervous system moves from settled to overwhelmed in a single step. What looks like a switch is a staircase. By the time you hear anything, your dog has already climbed it, quietly, while you were watching the other dog.

Somewhere on that staircase there was a moment when your dog could still hear you. That moment is the subject of this guide.

Trainers borrow a phrase from human psychology for this: the **window of tolerance**. It describes the range of arousal inside which an animal can still take in information and still learn. Inside the window, your dog is a participant. Outside it, your dog is a passenger. Behavior you have been working to change does not live at the far end of that range. It lives at the border — in the handful of moments when the body has begun to prepare and the mind has not yet been overtaken.

Most handlers are taught to watch for the reaction. Almost no one is taught to watch for the border.

There is an image we use for this called **the Waterline**. Behavior is what sits above it — barking, lunging, freezing, the things a stranger on the sidewalk can see. Below the waterline is everything that produced them: breath, posture, attention, the accumulated weight of the day. Working above the line means arguing with an outcome. Working below it means meeting what made the outcome inevitable.

What follows are five signals your dog offers before crossing that border. You have almost certainly seen all five this week. The difficulty is not that they are hidden. It is that four of them look like nothing at all — and one of them looks like calm.

Read them in the order they are given. That is usually the order in which they arrive.

1

THE FIRST DEPARTURE

The Breath Goes First

Long before a muscle commits, the air has already changed its mind.

WHAT YOU SEE

- An easy pant stops mid-rhythm. The mouth closes and stays closed.
- Or the opposite: panting begins on a cool morning, with no exertion behind it.
- The chest starts higher and moves faster. The belly stops participating.
- A single sharp inhale through the nose, held a beat too long.

WHAT IT MEANS

Breathing is the fastest thing the autonomic nervous system can change. It requires no decision, no movement, no commitment. Before the legs load, before the ears fix, before anything a bystander would call behavior, the body has quietly reassigned the air — from resting to readying.

This is why the first sign is nearly always missed. Nothing has happened yet. The leash is still slack. Your dog is, by every visible measure, fine.

WHAT TO DO

1. **Do not cue anything.** A cue given here becomes a cue given at the edge, and edges are where cues go to die.
2. **Change your own breath first.** One long exhale, longer than the inhale that preceded it. Your hands soften on their own when you do this. Your dog reads your hands.
3. **Buy room.** Distance is the only intervention that works at every level of arousal. Take it now, while it is still cheap.

FIELD NOTE

A closed mouth on a warm day is not calm. It is a held breath.

2

THE NOSE CHANGES JOBS

The Sniffing Stops

The same organ, doing entirely different work — and the difference tells you what your dog believes about the moment.

WHAT YOU SEE

- Your dog was working a patch of grass. The head comes up — and does not go back down.
- The nose lifts into the air rather than into the ground.
- Food offered on the ground is ignored, though it was welcome a minute ago.
- The whole route stops producing interest. Nothing is worth reading anymore.

WHAT IT MEANS

A dog with their nose down is a dog whose body believes it has time. Foraging is unhurried work; it belongs to the settled state, not the ready one. When the nose comes up and stays up, the animal has traded *gathering* for *scanning*. Same nose. Different question. Gathering asks *what has been here*. Scanning asks *what is coming*.

Notice the staying. A single lift is ordinary information. A nose that will not return to the ground has been recruited.

WHAT TO DO

1. **Give the nose a reason to come down while it still can.** A scatter of something good in the grass, tossed low and away from the trigger, not toward it.
2. **Move in an arc, not a line.** A curved path gives the eyes something to do and the body something to follow.
3. **Watch what the nose does next.** If it returns to the ground, you have your answer. If it comes down and pops straight back up, you are further along the staircase than you thought — take more room.

FIELD NOTE

A dog who stops reading the world has begun bracing against it.

3

THE BODY MAKES A PLAN

The Weight Moves

Preparation is not intention. There is still room between them, and that room is where the work happens.

WHAT YOU SEE

- The center of gravity slides forward. Front paws press. Shoulders load.
- Or it slides back — the body lowers, the dog gets smaller, the hind end sinks.
- A held foot. One paw lifts and stays lifted, mid-step, mid-thought.
- The topline stiffens. The tail stops moving as a tail and starts working as a rudder.

WHAT IT MEANS

Muscles preload before they fire. A sprinter does it in the blocks; your dog does it on the sidewalk. Forward loading and backward loading look like opposite behaviors and are the same event: the body has drafted a plan and is holding it, ready.

This is the last sign that is still purely physical. Nothing has been decided. Your dog is not yet committed to anything — the body is simply prepared, the way a hand tightens on a railing before the mind has registered the drop.

WHAT TO DO

1. **Change the geometry before the body executes the plan.** Turn your shoulders and walk a curve. A straight retreat reads as flight and can pull the dog with it.
2. **Unload the leash.** Tension on a loaded body confirms the plan. Slack does not.
3. **Give the weight somewhere useful to go.** A few steps of movement in any direction discharges a preload better than any word you own.

FIELD NOTE

You are not watching a decision. You are watching a body get ready to make one.

4

THE MOST MISREAD SIGNAL IN DOG TRAINING

The Stillness That Isn't Calm

This is the one that gets praised. Look how good he's being.

WHAT YOU SEE

- Everything stops. The small constant motions of a relaxed dog simply vanish.
- The ears quit sampling and lock on a single point.
- Head, shoulders, spine and gaze all line up on the same target.
- The dog does not respond to being touched or spoken to — and it reads as focus.

WHAT IT MEANS

A settled dog is never entirely still. The ears rotate a few degrees and come back. The weight shifts. The eyes travel and return. That low background motion is the sound of a nervous system with resources to spare, sampling a world it does not consider urgent.

When it all goes quiet, sampling has been replaced by locking on. Stillness of this kind is not composure. It is the body holding position while it decides, and it is the shortest of all five signs — it does not last.

Handlers miss this one for an understandable reason: it looks exactly like the behavior we have spent years rewarding.

WHAT TO DO

1. **Move. Now.** This is the last inexpensive exit. Do not wait to see what happens next; you already know what happens next.
2. **Break the line of sight with your own body,** stepping between rather than pulling away.
3. **Do not praise the stillness.** Whatever you reward here, you will get more of — including the state underneath it.

FIELD NOTE

Calm has motion in it. Freeze does not.

5

THE BORDER ITSELF

The Dog Stops Answering

Not a training hole. Not a character flaw. A status report, delivered in the only language available.

WHAT YOU SEE

- The name lands on nothing. You can watch it not arrive.
- Food is refused — or taken and dropped, or taken with a mouth gone hard and clumsy.
- Cues that were fluent five minutes ago produce a delay, then nothing.
- The dog is looking at you and still not with you.

WHAT IT MEANS

At sufficient arousal, the systems that retrieve learned behavior become difficult to reach. This is not a metaphor for stubbornness. It *may look* stubborn — but what is actually happening is that the body has redirected its resources to a problem it considers more urgent than your voice, and the parts responsible for recall and impulse control are the first to lose funding.

A dog who will not take chicken is not being difficult. They are telling you, precisely and honestly, where they are. Few instruments in dog training are as reliable as a refused treat.

This is the border. Past it, repetition does not help, volume does not help, and the encounter stops being training of any kind.

WHAT TO DO

1. **Stop asking.** Asking again is knocking on a door you have already been told is closed.
2. **Take real distance — more than feels necessary** — and go quiet. Silence is an intervention.
3. **Wait for the mouth to soften.** When the jaw loosens, when a shake-off arrives, when the nose finds the ground again: the window has reopened, and only then does anything you say mean anything.

FIELD NOTE

Refused food is not a failure of training. It is information you cannot get any other way.

THE SIXTH SIGNAL

The One You *Cannot* See, Because You Are Standing Inside It

There is a sixth signal, and it does not belong to your dog.

Watch the sequence again, honestly, the next time it happens. Somewhere near the beginning — often before the breath changes, sometimes so early that it seems to precede the trigger itself — your hand closes on the leash. Your shoulders rise. Your own breath stops in the top of your chest. You see the other dog first, and your body answers before you have decided anything.

Then your dog reads your hand.

This is the part of the story that rarely makes it into training plans, because it is the part where the handler is not an observer. Two nervous systems on either end of a six-foot line, each one taking readings from the other, and neither one waiting for permission.

You cannot regulate a nervous system from the far end of a tight leash.

Which leads somewhere useful, and slightly humbling. Of the two bodies on that sidewalk, only one of them can be changed on purpose, in the moment, at will. It is not the one with four legs.

Every response in this guide begins the same way — not because breathing is mystical, but because it is the only intervention you have that is instant, free, silent, and entirely under your control. Your exhale reaches your hands before any cue reaches your dog.

This is the quiet inversion at the center of the work: the fastest way to change what your dog does is to stop working on your dog.

WHAT TO DO

The Return

Six movements for the moment you catch a signal. They take less time to perform than to read. Practice them on quiet streets, so they are available on loud ones.

1 Stop asking.

Whatever cue was about to leave your mouth, let it go. Nothing you say improves the next few moments. Something you say can easily make them worse.

2 Soften the anchor hand.

Not a dropped leash — a released grip. Open the fingers one at a time and let the hand hang lower than feels natural. This single movement travels down the line faster than anything else you own.

3 Three exhales, each longer than its inhale.

Through the nose if you can. Do not count seconds; count breaths. Your shoulders will drop on the second one, and that drop is what your dog is actually reading.

4 Turn your shoulders and walk a curve.

Away, at an angle, unhurried. A curve is a suggestion; a straight retreat is an alarm. Let the leash stay loose enough that your dog chooses to come with you.

5 Put the nose to work.

A scatter in the grass, a slow search along a wall, a treat placed rather than thrown. Foraging is not a distraction from the work. It is the work, expressed in a form your dog already knows.

6 Wait for the shake-off.

A full-body shake with no water to explain it, a yawn, a softening jaw, a nose returning to the ground. This is the window reopening, and it is the moment — not before — when training becomes possible again.

FIELD NOTE

Nothing here is a correction. All of it is a return.

TAKE THIS OUTSIDE

The Field Log

Reading a single moment is a skill. Reading the pattern behind a hundred moments is a different one — and it is the one that changes things. Print this page. Fill a row whenever you catch a signal, whether or not anything happened next.

DATE & TIME	WHERE WE WERE	WHAT WAS THERE	FIRST SIGN I CAUGHT	DISTANCE	WHAT I DID	WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

What to look for after two weeks

Which sign arrives first for *your* dog.
Most dogs have a signature opener, and once you know it, you stop watching for five things and start watching for one.

What the empty rows tell you

Days with no entries are worth as much as days with them. Look at what was different: sleep, weather, the hour, who else was home, what happened the day before.

A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

What Is Established, and What Is Interpretation

Accuracy matters more here than persuasion, so it is worth separating what research supports from what field experience suggests.

BORROWED, AND LABELED AS SUCH

The **window of tolerance** comes from human clinical psychology, where it describes the band of arousal within which a person can still process experience. Applying it to dogs is an analogy — a useful and widely used one, but an analogy. It is a way of seeing, not a measurement.

SUPPORTED BY RESEARCH

That stress travels between the two ends of the leash is more than a felt impression. According to PubMed, a study of fifty-eight dog-owner pairs found that long-term stress levels, measured through hair cortisol, were correlated across species — and that the owners' personality traits, rather than the dogs' activity levels or training hours, were what tracked with the dogs' results. The authors concluded that dogs largely mirror the stress of the people they live with.

Sundman, A.-S., Van Poucke, E., Svensson Holm, A.-C., Faresjö, Å., Theodorsson, E., Jensen, P., & Roth, L. S. V. (2019). Long-term stress levels are synchronized in dogs and their owners. *Scientific Reports*, 9, 7391.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-43851-x>

FIELD OBSERVATION

The order of the five signs, the reliability of refused food as a marker, and the shake-off as a signal of return are drawn from years of watching dogs in the places where behavior actually happens — driveways, sidewalks, doorways, parking lots. They are offered as a way to look, not as a claim about mechanism. You should test them against your own dog, which is the only dog whose data matters to you.

ONE BOUNDARY

A sudden change in breathing, posture, or tolerance can also be pain, illness, or a change in vision or hearing. Nothing in this guide substitutes for veterinary assessment. If something shifted quickly and you cannot account for it, start with your veterinarian.

KEEP READING

Five Signs Is Where It *Starts*

You now have a way to see the moment before the moment. The next question is the larger one: what is your dog actually taking in, all day, that produces these moments in the first place?

FREE BOOK

The Canine Sensory Connection

Your dog is reading a world you cannot fully perceive — through scent, through sound below your hearing, through the pressure of a room and the state of the person holding the leash. Most behavior that looks unexplainable is a reasonable response to information you did not know was there. This book is about that information, and about what changes when you start accounting for it.

It sits alongside the 90-Day work, where the **Canine Resilience Assessment** (CRA) is administered at Day 0, Day 45, and Day 90 — one assessment, three times, so that change becomes something you can see rather than something you hope for.

[GET THE FREE BOOK](#)90days.coachingcaninecompanions.com

If reading this guide made you recognize your own dog on a particular street corner — write and tell me about it. There is no script and no funnel on the other end. Lorrie reads every reply personally.

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