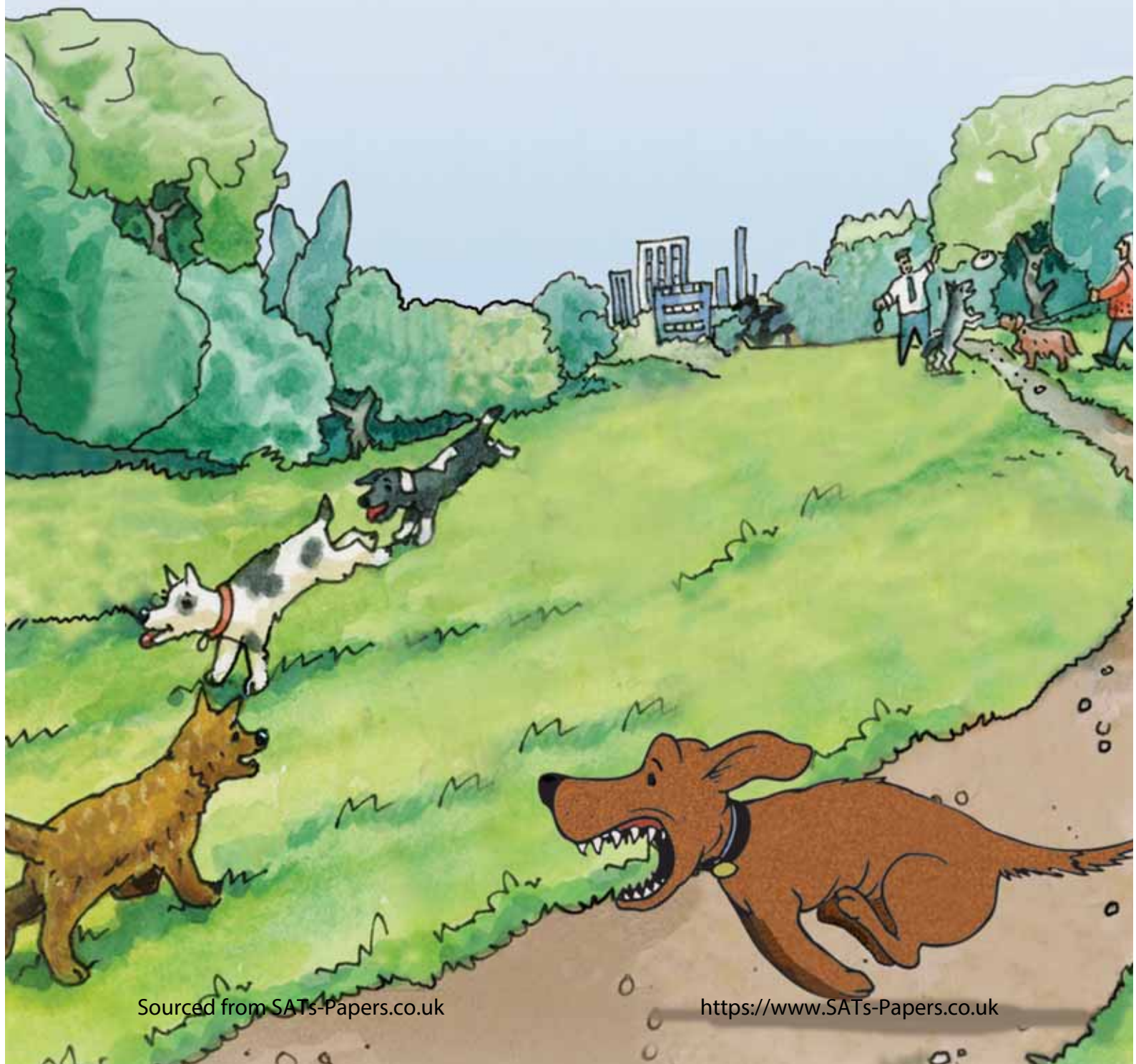


It's a Dog's Life



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The Monster of the Common



We've got a dog. Her name's Joker. She's a mongrel with a bit of beagle in her, a smallish black and brown animal with big floppy ears, and an amazing amount of energy. The one thing she really loves is her daily walk.

It was the walks that caused all the trouble.

When we'd finally persuaded Mum and Dad to let us have a dog we'd promised to take it for a walk every weekday after school.

But you know how it is when you stagger home from a hard day's school. All you fancy is a jam butty and a slump in front of the telly. A nice healthy walk is the last thing on your mind.

Sally and I started taking turns. Then one of us would say, "You take her today and I'll take her the next two times."



A complicated system of dog walk debts grew up and we often lost track of whose turn it really was, each insisting it was the other's go. One day we both refused to give in – and Joker didn't get her walk.

Next day at walk time Joker was nowhere in sight. She'd been out in the garden – but she wasn't there now.



Sally and I panicked and dashed out to search the Common. We looked everywhere, running up to every black and brown dog in sight, but none of them were Joker.

We staggered back home exhausted – and found Joker waiting for us on the doorstep. We made a big fuss of her, and took her inside, promising we'd never let her miss her walk again.

And we didn't – for a time. Then we got lazy again, and Joker missed another walk.

Once again she disappeared. But this time I didn't panic. "Look, she knows her way home," I said. "She'll come back when she's ready."

Sure enough, about an hour later there came a barking at the front door. Joker was back.

"What we've got here is a self-walking dog," I said. "We might as well leave things to her."

So that's what we did. At weekends the whole family took her for long walks. On weekdays Joker made her own arrangements, leaving us free to be couch potatoes – though somehow we never got round to telling Mum and Dad.



One day Sally read something out from the local paper. *Mystery Dog Terrorises Common*. Apparently a number of dog walkers had complained that a huge savage dog had appeared out of nowhere and set about their beloved pets.

Sally and I looked at each other – and at Joker who had just come back from her solo walk.

“It couldn’t be...” said Sally.

“No, of course not,” I said.
“Joker’s little and cute, not huge and savage. And she never gets into fights. It must be some stray dog that’s gone wild. They’ll catch it soon.”



But they didn’t. The stories went on appearing, week after week.

One day Joker was late coming back from her walk. It was getting near the time Mum and Dad got home, and I was a bit worried. I went outside and stood on the front steps. Suddenly I saw Joker trotting up the road towards me. I felt really relieved – but not for long.

We’d got a new neighbour next door but one, a large posh lady with a large posh poodle. Its name was Fifi, it had one of those special poodle-parlour haircuts and it was her pride and joy.

As Joker came up the street the poodle and its owner came out of their house and started down the street towards her.

Suddenly Joker spotted Fifi – and the transformation began. All Joker’s hair stood on end so that she really did look twice her usual size. Her lips drew back and she gave the sort of blood-curdling growl that you expect from a Doberman on a bad day. She streaked towards the poodle so fast that her ears flattened back in the slipstream.





I hurtled down the steps to intercept her. Our neighbour was unaware of the monster speeding towards them. Just as Joker reached her target I grabbed her by the collar and yanked her back. I was nearly in time – but not quite. As I hauled Joker away she had a clump of woolly poodle-fur between her teeth.

There was a terrible fuss after that. Joker was growling, Fifi was howling and her owner was screaming at me.

I gave Joker a good shake and yelled, “Stop it!” You could actually see sanity return. Her fur flattened, and her head, tail and ears dropped down.

“Is that dog yours?” snapped Fifi’s owner.

I was tempted to deny it – but at that moment Joker pulled away from me and dashed up the steps and into our house.

“I should like to see your parents,” said the lady grimly.

“They’re out,” I said, and bolted up the steps after Joker. Back in the house I told Sally what had happened.

“Oh no!” she gasped. “Joker, how could you?”

Joker curled up in her basket and pretended to be asleep.

Now it was fair enough Fifi’s owner coming to complain. But I still say it was silly of her to bring Fifi...

Dad opened the door, Joker at his heels – and Joker saw Fifi standing right on her doorstep!



Joker's fur swelled up, her lips drew back, she gave a blood-curdling growl and she hurled herself on poor Fifi. Dad made a frantic grab at Joker's collar and pulled her back – with another chunk of poodle-fur between her teeth!

When Mum and Dad had finally got rid of Fifi and her owner they came back into the kitchen and Mum said, "Well?"



Sally and I made a full confession. When we'd finished Dad said, "Right. Come on, you two!"

He stomped out to the car and Sally and I followed. I wasn't sure if we were being driven to the police station or the orphanage, but it turned out to be the local DIY centre.

We loaded up with wire and trelliswork, drove back home, and we all helped Dad transform the back garden into a fair imitation of a maximum security prison.

"And you two had better see she doesn't get out the front way," said Mum. "We got off lightly this time!"

Joker's days of solitary freedom are over now. She gets plenty of walks but all with human company. We keep an eye out for other dogs as well. If it's a little dog, there's nothing to worry about. If it's a smooth-coated dog of any shape or size, everything's fine.

But if the approaching dog is both large and woolly, we grab Joker quick and put her back on her lead. As we drag her past, the hair on her neck rises, just a bit, and we hear a low rumbling growl. Somewhere inside our lovable little family pet, the Monster of the Common is lurking still.

These days we don't take any chances.....



CANINE COMMUNICATION



DOG TO DOG COMMUNICATION

A dog's appearance often reflects its mood. When two dogs have a **dispute**, each will try to settle it by frightening the other off. Even though dogs can't speak like humans, they can communicate using noises and signals designed to show how strong they are. The disputes usually end with one animal fleeing or showing that it gives in to the other dog.

Body language

Dogs communicate with each other using facial expressions, **body language** and the way they stand. Although dogs do bark and growl, the message they are passing on is not complete without the body language that goes with it.

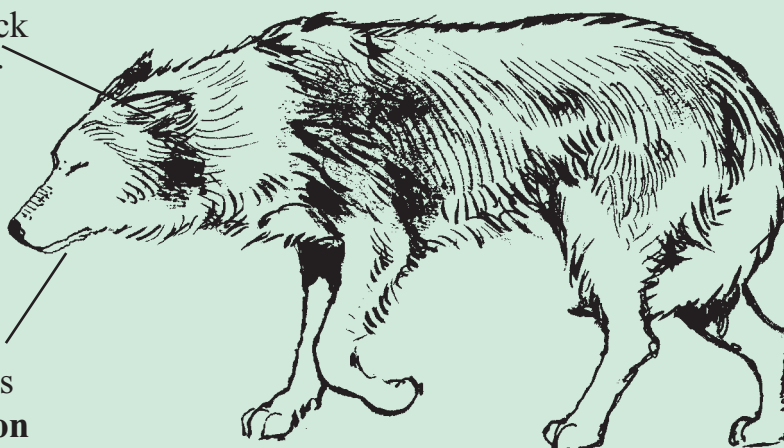
All dogs know the same language, no matter what breed they are. Dogs use different parts of their body in their body language including their face, eyes, lips, teeth, tongue, tail and ears.

So what does it mean?

By looking at the body language of a dog, it is possible to interpret its current mood or attitude. For example:

Ears laid back show fear or aggression

Mouth shut tightly shows **apprehension**



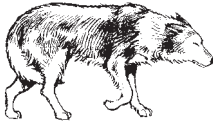



Tail between legs shows dog in a **submissive** stance

Words in **bold** can be found in the glossary



Look at the table below to see the differences in body language that a dog can display:

		APPEARANCE			
					
DESCRIPTION OF BODY LANGUAGE	MOOD / ATTITUDE	Aggressive	Alert	Fearful	Playful or happy
	EARS	Back and close to the head	Perked-up, turning to catch sounds	Laid back flat and low on the head	Perked-up and forward
	EYES	Narrow, or staring in a challenging way	Open wide	Narrow and averted	Wide open and alert
	MOUTH / TEETH	Lips open Teeth bared in a snarl	Mouth closed or slightly open with teeth covered	Lips drawn back to show teeth	Relaxed and possibly slightly open
	BODY	Tense Upright Hackles raised	Normal, possibly standing on tiptoe	Tense and crouched low Shivering and trembling	Normal May stand still or wiggle the rear end
	TAIL	Straight out from body and fluffed up	Up in the air and possibly wagging	Down between the legs	Up or out from the body Wagging



Strange but true...

We are sent some very strange stories here in the office, but this week's is the strangest yet. It's about a gadget that's supposed to let you know what your pet is saying. Inventors in Japan claim that the device, called the 'Bow-lingual', can translate barks and growls into human language.

A small microphone is attached to your dog's collar and it 'reads' dog-speak by matching sounds to pre-programmed wave patterns. The makers of the machine claim that it can make sense of a range of six



expressions including 'playful', 'bored' and 'happy'. You can even set it to diary mode and it will record your dog's feelings throughout the day.

It sounds a bit far-fetched to us. Just imagine coming home from school and asking your dog what sort of day he's had!



GLOSSARY

<i>aggressive</i>	angry and likely to make the first attack
<i>apprehension</i>	a feeling of fear
<i>averted</i>	looking away
<i>body language</i>	a way of communicating feelings, through the use of gestures or actions
<i>canine</i>	any animal of the dog family
<i>dispute</i>	an argument or disagreement
<i>hackles</i>	the hair of a dog's neck
<i>submissive</i>	willing to give in



Acknowledgements: 'The Monster of the Common', adapted from 'Jekyll & Jane' by Terrance Dicks, from *Snake on the Bus and other Pet Stories*, edited by Valerie Bierman, Mammoth Books.

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