

## Introduction

Welcome to the Language of Lagomorphs, your guide to speaking fluent Rabbit. Or something like that!

Being able to speak and understand Rabbit requires that you learn to think at least a little like a rabbit. Your rabbit will never learn to understand many of the mysterious things **you** do (“Why the heck did she just change into three different outfits before leaving for work?”), but you can certainly understand why rabbits do what they do. You’ll be pretty close to the truth if you think of rabbits as being from a society very different from your own, with different priorities, goals, important lessons, and gestures. Learning Rabbit is in some ways like human cultural studies, but of course the subject individuals have much longer ears.

People who expect rabbits to be like dogs often find the most important difference in the relationships they form with humans is that dogs may give unconditional love and trust, but rabbits don’t. Please repeat after me... rabbits are not like dogs, rabbits are not like cats, rabbits are like rabbits. This is why it’s so important to know how they think and what they want! As it turns out, what all rabbits want more than anything is respect and affection, and when you learn to give these properly (i.e. like a rabbit) you’ll freely get them in return.

A great deal of the signaling described here involves the use of uppy ears, which not all domestic rabbit breeds have. Lop-eared rabbits will move their ears in a manner consistent with what uppy eared rabbits will do, but the results are usually much less obvious. Different lops will vary in how they are capable of moving their ears, and may therefore be able to use only certain of the ear signals described here. Still, with close attention you may be able to draw almost as much information from the behavior of a lop as an uppy eared rabbit. You can consider Lop as the language Rabbit, but spoken with an accent.

Some signals’ descriptions might be superficially similar and yet have very different meanings. For instance, an angry rabbit, one that’s scared, and one asking to be groomed will all have their ears back. Accompanying signals will almost always indicate the real meaning, but the situation’s **context** (i.e. recent events) will also help to make things clear.

Rabbits use a lot of special postures to signal others, but just because some particular action or pose is a signal in one context doesn’t mean that every time a rabbit does it a meaningful signal is intentionally being given. As Sigmund Freud once said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Don’t worry if some of the material here seems a bit complicated or hard to master. Humans are excellent at recognizing nonverbal communication, including context and accompanying signals. We do it all the time with each other, and it comes quite naturally.

This guide runs a bit long for the sake of completeness, and you probably won’t remember everything you’ve read after one time through. However, if you come away with a

The stars of our show...



Betsy Vanderbun



Marvin Underfoot

### Do rabbits really use “language?”

Well, scientifically speaking, no. One of the primary characteristics of language is syntax. Syntax means that words are put together into phrases using ordering rules that affect meaning. It’s part of grammar.

The scientific term for how rabbits communicate is “signaling.” Signals don’t necessarily have to be presented in a particular order. They can change meaning under different contexts, though, and

good idea of what is important to rabbits, and a general feel for how they express themselves, you'll do just fine. You can always come back to the guide later and easily find confirmation and clarification for what you've seen.

It's worth noting that the rabbits whose pictures appear here are neutered, as should always be the case if breeding is not a requirement. For brevity, this guide doesn't include signals used exclusively or almost only by unneutered rabbits. Unneutered rabbits are often significantly more aggressive, and may be less interested in conversing with you about anything but hierarchy and territoriality. Perhaps you can remember when you were irresistibly hormone driven (last weekend at the neighborhood barbecue?) and will understand. We can only hope that you didn't mark your territory by spraying urine all over.

The stars of this site are two rabbits who patiently provided the poses I've used to illustrate the text: Betsy (a black Dutch) and Marvin (a tricolored, broken-patterned mix). They're supermodels of the rabbit world. My wife provided insightful suggestions and kindly editing, as well as Betsy and Marvin's biographies.

Finally, this guide isn't about training your rabbit, or about how to bond two rabbits, which are also important aspects of behavior. You can learn more about these activities elsewhere, in resources given in the [Further Reading page](#). Learning to speak Rabbit, though, will help with every other aspect of living with a rabbit. Oh, it's also kind of fun.

### The Basic Bunny Body Positions



Lying



Sitting.



Standing

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that certainly is important in rabbit communication.

Nonscientifically speaking, though, a language can be any system of signs, signals and utterances that are used to communicate. Under that definition, anyone would agree that rabbits have a very sophisticated language for a non-human species.

This Language of Lagomorphs ebook has been online helping people and bunnies understand each other since 1999 — Woo!

# The Language of Lagomorphs

Your Guide to Rabbit Communication

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## Prove That You Love Me

Unlike most cats, but like dogs, domestic rabbits are very social animals. The domestic rabbit comes from Europe, where its wild relatives typically live in colonies of up to several dozen individuals. They share living space and food, warn each other about danger, and establish a hierarchy in which each rabbit knows his or her place. Unlike rabbits in the wild, rabbits who are neutered and living in human homes don't necessarily form two separate hierarchies for males and females, and who is dominant may depend little upon their sex. Somewhat like chickens, where the hierarchy is evidenced by who pecks who (the infamous pecking order), rabbits demonstrate dominance by establishing who grooms who (the licking or grooming order). Don't worry, though. You are permitted to groom with your hands rather than your tongue.

Although a royal (dominant) rabbit will sometimes groom one of his or her vassals, including licking you, it commonly goes only one way. The top rabbit in the group must be worshipped and obeyed by all, and may present him or herself for grooming to any other rabbit, who must comply. Although grooming does help keep those hard to reach places tidy, it's very much a social activity, and a critical one for most rabbits' happiness. Who would guess that getting a little forehead rub now and again could be the key to self-esteem, comfort and well-being? Oh...you might enjoy it too.

A rabbit will present itself for grooming by coming right up next to you, maybe nudging you a bit with its nose or poking its nose under your hand or foot, then lowering its chin and chest to the ground, and stretching its head forward while keeping its rear up a bit. While the ears may get laid back a little, this is quite different from the signal for fear (in which the head is never stretched forward) or anger (which is almost always indicated while standing).

This is not generally a request for grooming; most often it is more like an order. Disobeying this order can lead to unhappiness, chewing on your clothing, or even an annoyed nip. Repeatedly ignoring a rabbit's invitation for grooming will lead to insult and frustration, which can in turn result in having your rugs shredded, your baseboards removed, and your pillow peed upon. It's way easier to provide at least a few strokes on the forehead upon request to support your rabbit's self-esteem.

As mentioned, an invitation to groom is not just a polite request, and refusing can have unpleasant consequences. Another way to get your attention for grooming, popular if you are sitting in a chair at a desk concentrating on work, for instance, is to "dig" on top of your foot by scratching hard. This makes for a real surprise if you don't know the rabbit is down there and you aren't wearing shoes or socks. An invitation to groom is serious business.

Some very aggressive rabbits may use biting even more than grooming to establish and demonstrate their dominance. A rabbit establishing dominance by biting typically won't just nip, as rabbits may do to get your attention or even because they're excited, but instead may bite down hard and even hold on tight. Obviously you will want to break the



"I deserve a nose rub."



"You there. Nose rub. Now."

rabbit of this habit, and quickly! The bibliography at the end of this guide includes some references for dealing with overly aggressive bunnies.

Some lordly rabbits will lay across the necks of subordinate rabbits to confirm their dominance. This may be why holding down a rabbit with a firm (but not too firm!) hand over the neck and shoulders will often cause it to quiet if you need to settle it down for nail trimming or ear inspections.

Some rabbits are less tied to the necessities of hierarchy, and may equally come to you for grooming and lick you in turn. Other rabbits may not participate in establishing dominance with other rabbits, refusing to provide grooming but not demanding they be groomed. Every rabbit is an individual with its own personality that you'll have to learn for yourself. All rabbits like being groomed, though, unless they're scared, angry, or too insulted to have anything to do with you.

Some rabbits will lick objects around you, rather than your body or the clothes you're wearing. This is used to indicate that they like you very much even though you're a subordinate. It will be performed very clearly in your view and while watching you. They seem particularly to choose objects that have your scent, such as places where you sit or clothing you're removed. I think it's fair to interpret this as giving you the gift of being groomed, though indirectly.

You may wonder how you're going to get your rabbit to obey you in anything (e.g. going back into her or his cage) if you aren't the boss. The answer is that rabbits are perfectly capable of believing several things at once. As long as you demonstrate they're the big boss by obeying the licking order, you get to be the little boss and be obeyed in everything else. That should give you some idea of a rabbit's priorities. A rabbit can be completely secure in its high status and still obey your commands. It's great that human and rabbit priorities are completely different, so that all of us can get what we want and need.

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## Yeah Baby, I Like It Like That

Social grooming focuses on the rabbit's head, and humans can perform this task by stroking or massaging the forehead (backward only), massaging the base of the ears and the side of the rear jaw (not the bottom or back!), and tugging the ears gently (unless the rabbit is ticklish there). Many people and rabbits enjoy grooming that includes plucking out loose fur, which can actually be more effective than brushing. Rabbits also like getting their eyes cleaned, and wiping the corners where stuff accumulates will be appreciated.

**The language of Lagomorphs** the rabbit being groomed during these sessions to show affection, and you might like doing this too. Putting your hand under a rabbit's head, however, is a statement that you insist on being groomed yourself in turn. Some rabbits will give you a lick to show their appreciation, but many will get insulted or angered by your presumption. Also, few rabbits are comfortable being touched on their bellies or lower sides (a ticklish place), or their hindquarters (where aggressive rabbits bite). If you're using a brush, though, long strokes from head to hind are often acceptable. Just don't poke!

Rabbits often indicate their appreciation of your grooming by gently grinding their teeth, which you can often hear and sometimes feel through their skull. Some people call this a "tooth purr." If you're grooming or otherwise petting your rabbit and it purrs like this, do it more like that. Ahhhhhh.... Some rabbits will also mumble to indicate enjoyment while you groom them, with a sort of deep, grumbly, muttering noise.

Some rabbits will help you learn to groom them just exactly how they like it. They may lean into your hand to indicate they want a harder rub. A rabbit may also turn or rearrange itself to present different places for massage. If the rabbit you are grooming seems to be trying to tell you something, but doesn't simply hop away, you should experiment a bit to figure out what is being requested. If what you are doing is actually disliked then the rabbit won't stick around, so any behavior less than leaving probably indicates a request for something a little different from what you're doing.

You can offer grooming to your rabbit, even when you haven't been invited, by offering your hand. You should do so by putting your hand on the ground from six inches to a couple of feet in front of the rabbit. Scratching the ground there a bit can help. If your invitation is accepted, the rabbit will move a bit forward toward your hand, lower its head and front body, and fold its ears back. If the rabbit rears up, or gives you a skeptical turned-sideways pose, your invitation hasn't been accepted.

Remember that from the big boss's point of view, being allowed to groom a rabbit is a privilege and honor, and such grace may not always be bestowed on you. Then again, some rabbits are a bit more, uh, loose with their affections. Bonus fact: If you haven't learned this already, you can look forward to exactly the same sorts of people and situations when you begin dating.

Note that some rabbits, particularly if they aren't yet familiar with you, will charge at a hand placed before them, and maybe even bite it. Nervous or aggressive rabbits may do



"No thanks, I'll clean this myself."

this a lot even after they know you. The best thing to do is just stay mellow, and try to get in a few forehead rubs anyway. Eventually the rabbit should get the picture: that a hand placed in this way is not a threat but an offer. Learning good communication can be hard and a little painful, but it's always worthwhile.

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## Ah, This is the Life

In addition to grooming each other, rabbits love to just hang out and gaze at each other and you. Sitting on the floor near your rabbit and just gazing or chatting (the rabbit won't talk back except with nose wiggling and ear signaling) is considered very companionable. Some rabbits like to sit in front of the television while you watch it. Fortunately, they don't seem to realize you aren't watching them.

**The language of Lagomorphs** indicate just how comfortable and happy with the world it is. As a general rule, the harder it is to get up from a position quickly and run, the more the rabbit is indicating that it's relaxed and comfortable.

Calm contemplation is indicated by lying on one's belly with front and rear legs tucked under, with ears up and facing forward. As a rabbit relaxes, its back will sink lower and the rabbit will flatten, which on a fat rabbit can look like it's turning into a big fur puddle. The legs-tucked-under position is most commonly called the "meatloaf" (also called the "bunny hen," or, if the forelegs are stretched forward, the "sphinx"). An even more relaxed lying position includes one or two rear legs stuck out sideways, with the body often stretched out and sometimes rolled a bit to the side. A rabbit lying like this is indicating that it is very comfortable. Some people call this pose the "lambchop." A more relaxed variant of the lambchop has the rabbit with its feet stretched out directly behind.

Very relaxed rabbits will roll onto their sides or even on their backs. A favorite way to do this is to first twist one's head sideways, then fling the rest of the body into line so that the feet fly out to the side. This is called a "flop" and indicates a very happy bunny. A happy rabbit may lie on its side (or back), and stretch or wiggle or sometimes just hold still there. It may even roll its eyes a bit so that the white shows. When you first see this you will probably be afraid your rabbit is dead, because it looks pretty odd. If you rush over to give it CPR, it will quickly right itself and look strangely at you for disturbing a nice stretch.

Note: If rabbits don't get along they may play a little game one could call "I'm happier than you are." Usually when a rabbit flops near another it shows how comfortable it is with the other, but with rabbits that are not good friends it can actually be used as a mild insult. When used in this way it means something similar to the "I don't care about you" insult described later, but more like "I'm happy and you're a miserable excuse for a rabbit, so there."



I'm melting!



Lounging is my life.



Marvin with the big setup... and... flop!





## Follow My Nose

Most rabbits at rest will be wiggling their noses. Rabbits don't need to do this to smell things, and they don't necessarily do it in time with their breathing, and they sometimes stop completely. So why do they do it at all? A rabbit's nose is like a thermometer for how interested it is in what's being observed. The faster the wiggling, the more attentive or agitated the rabbit is. Nose wiggle signaling is generally only used by rabbits that are already moderately relaxed.

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A fast wiggle doesn't necessarily mean a rabbit is upset. It may just signal interest in something being witnessed, or some passing thought. A slowly wiggling nose indicates a calm rabbit. Rabbits usually use nose wiggling to indicate fine gradations in their mood. If you start moving around or doing something odd, that nose will start moving faster, and the rabbit may also turn its ears to focus more upon you. If a rabbit is considering fleeing, though, it will usually stop wiggling its nose completely.

One way to help calm a rabbit is to do the equivalent of whispering "there, there, it's all right" using slow nose wiggling. Of course, humans can't really wiggle their noses properly (OK, maybe you can), but rabbits will understand if you just use your upper lip. If you roll your upper lip under your top teeth and back again, this looks much like a rabbit nose wiggle. It's especially effective if you happen to have a mustache. On the other hand, some folks can actually wiggle their noses enough for the rabbit to recognize it. Experiment to see what your rabbit responds to.

You may also notice a rabbit will suddenly stop wiggling its nose, and this is a signal too. It seems to mean either that the interest level has gone beyond the highest wiggle rate, or that what is being observed is somehow confusing (either or both, depending on the context).

You might have fun with this rabbit conversational technique, which is also a good way to test if your nose wiggling is being done properly. (Warning: Doing this can make your family fear for your sanity.) Lie on the floor facing your rabbit while it's sitting or lying a few feet away. Your rabbit, who will be curious about what you're doing, will probably indicate its attention by speeding up its nose wiggling. Do your own wiggling, but a little more slowly than the rabbit. The rabbit's nose will probably slow. As its nose slows, keep slowing yours until you are both wiggling at a sedate pace. Then start speeding up your wiggling without doing anything else. You'll probably see the rabbit start going faster too! Then you can both slow down to a calm, life-is-good rate of wiggling again. Personally, I only do this when no one else is watching.

#### How does nose wiggling relate to other signals?

Body position is the best indicator for **relaxation**, and ear position shows **attentiveness** (among other things). Nose wiggling rate seems to say more about the personal **interest** the rabbit has in what is being observed.

These three aspects of mood are typically related, but don't have to always move together. For instance, a relaxed but attentive rabbit doesn't necessarily have to be particularly interested in what it's seeing, although it may be.



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## R-E-S-P-E-C-T is What My Bun Demands of Me

You've probably heard that Eskimos have many words for different types of snow, it being so important to their daily lives. Well, rabbits have many expressions that mean, "You've offended me," which indicates how important respect and insults are to rabbits.

Disagreements don't usually require a brawl, but they do typically require that someone get insulted and someone apologize. Since the apology usually just requires some forehead stroking, and maybe a conciliatory raisin, it's worth trying to get back on your

**The Language of Lagomorphs** If a rabbit folds off, though, you may have to just suffer the humiliation of being shunned. After a while, you'll be allowed to apologize. An offended rabbit who is not apologized to can hold a grudge or maintain a sulk for many, many days.

There is an escalating set of moves that a rabbit will use to indicate everything from "I don't care about you anyway," to "You are the scum of the earth," as exemplified in The Offendedness Scale given below. To some extent, a rabbit's body position and the direction its ears are facing are like coarse and fine dials for mood, which when pointed at you are good and when pointed away are bad. When a rabbit is facing you directly, with its ear openings facing you, you are being accorded respect and appreciation. When the ears and/or body start being turned to face away from you, you're being told that your behavior has been questionable. (Note: Some rabbits like to have their backs scratched or to be groomed with their backs turned, in which case they will remain in easy reach or even pressed against you. Insulted rabbits will typically step away, at least slightly beyond easy reach.) If a rabbit turns away completely, and folds its ears down onto its back, you are definitely in the doghouse. You can confirm this by offering a raisin, which will probably be rebuffed ("I don't want any of your lousy raisins.") Only the passage of time will allow you to be given the opportunity to redeem yourself.

If these moves are performed while sitting, then a conversation is in progress, and you can act to improve your status with a suitable apology. But if the rabbit is lying down, then a conclusion has been reached, and you will have to work harder to make amends, maybe not even until later after you've learned your lesson.

### The Offendedness Scale

Offense Level: 1 — Skeptical

What They Do: Rabbit moves into your vicinity, faces you a moment, then examines the ground around its feet as if there is something there much more interesting than you are.

What It Means: "Not everything is about you, ya know." (May be used just to show you who's boss.)



Action: Left ear nearly facing forward (see the pink inside?), with right ear facing and tilted backwards. Aggressive stance.  
Translation: "Are you trying to annoy me? Because it's working."



"Actually, yes, this is indeed my chair. Since you asked."

Offense Level: 2 — Wary

What They Do: Rabbit sitting in your vicinity turns sideways, or a little turned away, ears up, and looks at you with one eye.

What It Means: “Hmm, what’s your problem?” or “Just what do you mean by that, buddy?”

(Not always meaningful, though.)



Offense Level: 3 — Annoyed

What They Do: Rabbit’s ears are sloping back instead of held upright, but still turned to face forward or sideways.

What It Means: “You’re not a nice person.”



Offense Level: 4 — Peeved

What They Do: Rabbit steps away a bit (out of easy grooming range) and turns its back to you, but looks over its shoulder to make sure you’re noticing.

What It Means: “You’re in some trouble now, mister.”



Offense Level: 5 — Insulted

What They Do: Rabbit turns and hops away, flicking its feet quickly backward and to the sides in an exaggerated way, often making a sort of whooshing noise (a “foot-flick,” or being “flipped off”).

What It Means: “I am shaking your dust off my heels.”

Offense Level: 6 — Shunning

What They Do: Rabbit turns its back to you and sits or lies down, without even looking back.

What It Means: “You are behaving unacceptably.”

Offense Level: 7 — Deeply Hurt

What They Do: Rabbit turns its back to you, lies down, and folds its ears all the way down, to shut out both the sight and sound of you.

What It Means: “You are the scum of the earth. I’ll have nothing to do with you.”

By the way, two can play the “I’m offended” game. If a rabbit is not behaving properly (sitting upon inappropriate furniture, for example) and you want to indicate this in a mild way using language it will understand, go ahead and show that you’re insulted. You have to do this right after the rabbit does something bad for it to work. Go right up to the rabbit, take one step backwards, and turn your back pointedly. You might watch by peeking over your shoulder a bit, to indicate that you are willing to forgive. If your rabbit comes

over to sniff or poke you with its nose, you may choose to provide a small pat on the forehead to indicate forgiveness. Rabbits are sensitive to feeling shamed.

Of course, if the problem behavior is something really bad, you should first shout “No” and make it stop before demonstrating that you are offended. In this case, you may end up back to back, in an insult contest. If so, try wiping your face and hair a bit (i.e. grooming yourself), to show that you’re willing to stand there forever until an apology is forthcoming. If none is given, walk away, flicking your feet backwards. Make sure the rest of your family understands what you’re doing so they don’t drag you to the psychiatrist. Warning: they might do so anyway.

Rabbits use an ear wobble (or head wobble for lops) not as an insult, but to politely say “no thank you” or “I’d rather not.” The ear wobble is a gentle twist of the neck back and forth once or twice that makes the ears move from side to side, and is usually done while standing and facing you. Some situations that can evoke an ear wobble are when you offer food that the rabbit isn’t interested in, or when you try to slip your hand under its chin and it doesn’t want to groom you (although some rabbits will find this outright insulting if you’re assuming a privilege you are definitely not entitled to).

Incidentally, it is considered very insulting to hop quickly by right in front of another rabbit or you without stopping for a moment to offer the polite rabbit greeting of touching noses. Obviously, a rabbit can’t ponder peacefully while someone rushes back and forth in front of its face, and rabbits looking for trouble with other rabbits will do exactly this. You may encounter one consequence of this behavior yourself if you walk right past your rabbit quickly, in which case the rabbit might even charge at you in outrage! You can avoid this by giving an equivalent to touching noses when you walk by: a quick pat on the forehead. Not all rabbits are so easily insulted, though.

Finally, there is the all-out nuclear weapon of insults, reserved only for the most offensive, utterly unacceptable, good for nothing individuals and behavior: urine. And if you’ve ever had to clean up a pungent puddle of bunny pee, often bright yellow, orange, or even red, and more than a little odorous, then you know just how powerful this weapon really is. Note that urine used for marking territory and ownership is another story entirely. But when your rabbit pees on your pillow (yes, it happens), you have obviously qualified as the lowest of the low. If you respond in kind, then you probably deserved it.

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## Gimme Some Space, Man

Rabbits are territorial, and divide the world into personal places only for them and their closest associates, public places, and places owned by others. Some rabbits are more territorial than others, but many rabbits will be very angry if you reach into their homes (always a personal place), especially while they're inside. If you do so, anticipate getting charged at, pounded hard with pointy-tipped paws, and even bitten. If you're going to mess around in a rabbit's home, it's usually best to do so while it's visiting elsewhere.

Rabbits recognize when a space is owned by others, and where they're not allowed to go. Of course, places owned by others just beg to be visited whenever possible, although it's understood that one might get chased back out. After all, perhaps today one might be allowed in. Testing is the only way to be sure. Accordingly, you may set aside rooms where rabbits are not allowed, but don't expect them not to try to go in anyway. They might actually hesitate at the door, though, to make sure you aren't inside and watching.

The main way that rabbits indicate they own a place is by placing some big dry droppings (pellets) there. Those are in addition to the usual ones placed in the litter box! A rabbit will always place some pellets in its home, of course. If you have several pets and your rabbit feels somewhat threatened by them, it may also stake out some other places around the house or apartment, particularly in corners. Unfortunately, there's no way to really prevent this except to make your rabbit feel very secure and in charge, so it doesn't feel it needs to aggressively mark its space. Wiping the area with some vinegar may help.

You may notice a rabbit brushing or rubbing its chin against things, particular on the edges of objects, corners that stick out, or any unusual object in its path. Rabbits have scent glands under their chins that they use to mark their territory and objects they own. We can't smell the scent, and it doesn't stain or cause visible marks. There's no reason not to let them mark everything in sight, including you, which many rabbits will indeed do. Trying to do the same by rubbing your armpits against objects to mark them won't impress the rabbit or anyone else.

Unneutered/unspayed rabbits will also spray urine to mark territory, as well as "objects" they own (sometimes including other rabbits). All pet rabbits should be neutered or spayed, which will generally stop this behavior. Wiping an area with vinegar will help kill the urine smell and may cut down on spraying there.

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## Why, You Fiend!

Occasionally, you will see a rabbit enraged. You might accidentally make a social “faux paw,” which may result in anger, before leading to the inevitable conclusion that you are guilty of insult. Or you might have gotten yourself into real trouble, leading to sulking and destructive behavior. It’s useful to be able to recognize the range from uneasy to furious, since this can save you from a lot of apologizing and making up later, as well as possibly saving your rugs.

Rabbits express anger using their ears, stance, and tail. Ears are most important. A happy rabbit keeps its ears pointed up and turned forward. Increasing anger is indicated by turning the ears to first point sideways, then backward. A raised tail, held out from the body instead of tight against the bum, shows excitement and agitation.

The greatest outrage is shown by lowering the backwards-pointing ears down to the body. You won’t mistake this for an invitation to grooming, because that is accompanied by lowering the chest all the way to the ground too, which an angry rabbit never does. At the extreme, a rabbit’s tail will be held out stiffly and it will look ready for a leap forward. If you see this, then you’re facing one very pissed off bunny.

Stance indicates what the rabbit is going to do about its anger. If you’re being faced head-on, with front legs spread to give a firm stance, then the rabbit is ready to take you on. You might get bit! Front legs together is a less aggressive stance. A rabbit turned more or less to one side is possibly more insulted or afraid than angry. The actions of “The Anger Scale” below are all performed while facing you directly.

## The Anger Scale



Ears Facing: sideways  
Ears Pointing: up or slightly lowered back  
What It Means: Watch it, buddy.



Ears Facing: backward  
Ears Pointing: up  
What It Means: You’re cruising for a bruising, dude.

## The Dangers of Poor Communication

Diane had an interesting experience at a children’s book conference. One publisher had hung a large poster of a rabbit standing aggressively with its ears turned backward. It was clearly upset and ready to attack.

When she pointed this out to one of the staff members, she was told “Why, whatever do you mean? That’s a photo of a cute bunny, don’t you think?” Since she speaks fluent Rabbit, Diane didn’t think it was a cute bunny at all. It was more like a dangerous and scary beast!

Actually, you’ll find a lot of “cute bunny” pictures showing rabbits that are mighty annoyed. That’s not too surprising since the photographer has probably been arranging and rearranging the poor thing, not to mention shining bright lights or even popping flashbulbs at it.

Ears Facing: backward and down

Ears Pointing: lowered way back

What It Means: That's it! Time for your lesson in pain.

[no photo here ... too busy running away]

A very aggressive rabbit, or one who's decided you are too dumb for diplomacy, will charge at you and possibly bite whatever part of you happens to be handy. An angry rabbit may also "growl" which usually sounds more like an angry grunt. You'll recognize it from the context, and because it is always accompanied by the backwards and lowered ears. If a rabbit growls, a bite may not be far off.

One way to defuse an angry encounter is to start grooming yourself, wiping your face and running your fingers through your hair. This indicates that the situation really should not be all that serious, and that everyone should just chill out. Often the rabbit will respond by doing the same, to indicate it agrees. Rabbits can be good diplomats.

Some rabbits, generally those with a history of frightening experiences and the resulting distrust, are simply extremely aggressive. They may actually chase you around and clamp their teeth onto you without any obvious provocation. This is very different from the occasional nips of a rabbit trying to get your attention, prancing around your feet happily, or telling you to buzz off. If you're living with such a dangerous creature, try reading some of the resources on the [Further Reading](#) page that address aggressive rabbits.

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## Alas, Woe is Me

An unhappy rabbit will usually lay its ears back with the openings down, and turn itself either to the side or toward you nervously. The farther back the ears fall, the more unhappiness is indicated. This differs from other ear-back signals, which require that the rabbit firmly face toward you (anger), crouch or turn sideways with ear openings turned sideways (fear), or pointedly turn its back (insult).

**The Language of Lagomorphs** (some anger) is having one ear facing backward and one forward, or one ear down and one up. These usually indicate a rabbit that is less than happy, but sometimes for only vaguely defined reasons. A little grooming or a raisin gift can often turn that frown upside down. A more serious sulk is indicated by ears tilted far back, or (even worse) tilted back and facing down, all done while lying facing you (or facing to the side; not directly away from you, which is an outright insult) in a meatloaf position. This is a seriously sad rabbit, and you should take some time to think about what might be wrong. It might even be sick, so check the litterbox for evidence.

Note that rabbits often sleep lying with their ears laid back in a fashion very similar to the “sulking” signal and with their eyes narrowed but not closed. They always have particular places they sleep, though, so you probably won’t confuse the two.

A nervous or frightened rabbit will face its ears backward and lower them, but with the openings facing sideways rather than back, and often will point its ears a bit out to the side rather than straight back. If you reach for your rabbit and it lowers its head and ears, spreading its ears or tilting both ears to one side rather than keeping them pointed straight back, it is scared. This is usually accompanied with a stance that leaves the rabbit ready to flee, and may include ducking the head. Mild nervousness may be sometimes shown by stance alone. A scared rabbit will not stand aggressively as if it’s about to charge you, like an angry one will, although otherwise the signals can be a bit related (as are fear and anger).

A rabbit that is dismayed, confused, or trying but not succeeding in communicating with you will sometimes wince. In a wince, one eye gets closed, and the whole forehead moves toward that eye. It’s over in just a second. It looks something like a wink, but it’s a signal of mild unhappiness. When you first try using some of the signals described here, you may get winced at, generally because your body language is not consistent with the signal you’re giving or something about the context is just not right. If your rabbit winces when you try to communicate, you probably need to work more on your conversational skills. However, most rabbits should eventually learn to understand you once they get used to your incredibly bad accent.

A rabbit that is very scared or nervous may “thump” a hind leg, slapping it hard against the ground. This isn’t just a warning to other rabbits, but to you, too. Note that rabbits sometime also thump to indicate anger, or even just to say “pay attention,” but it should be pretty easy to distinguish these by the context.



“You don’t love me anymore.”



“I am just not sure about you, Bub.”



“I’ll lend you an ear, but two you’ll have to earn.”



“Ulp!”



“Uh, I think this is where I leave.”

A rabbit that is scared but can't run, or one that is nervous, may chatter its mouth (the way humans do when they're cold). Chattering teeth or loud tooth grinding (not the soft kind heard sometimes during grooming) can also indicate a rabbit in pain, so you should do some checking for indication that it's sick.

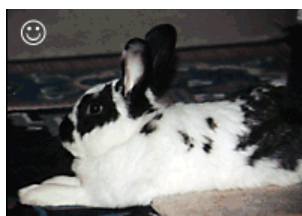


"You're going to stick that where?!"

Some rabbits will mutter nervously to themselves. This sound is usually a little higher pitched than the happy mumbling of a rabbit being groomed, and sounds very different from a rabbit grunting as it eats or grunt-growling at you when it's angry. I've been told, though, that some rabbits just always are muttering to themselves, and in such cases doesn't necessarily indicate nervousness, but is probably just comfortable social mumbling. In fact, female rabbits may "coo" while nursing their pups. The context of the situation should make the meaning pretty clear.

When a rabbit is frustrated with being locked in its cage it may loudly toss things around or otherwise "rattle the bars." This is meant to get your attention, of course, and typically is a request to be allowed out.

Finally, a rabbit in terror or in severe, acute pain may scream. I'm told it is a terrible sound, but, fortunately, I've never heard this vocalization. I sincerely hope you never hear it either.



"Must you keep flashing that thing in my eyes?" (aka "As The Ears Turn")

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## Hmm, What Do We Have Here?

Like all mammals, rabbits are very curious by nature. As soon as they're comfortable with their nearby environment, they'll start exploring beyond it. An extremely curious rabbit is very easy to recognize, because it's the only time you'll find their ears tilted forward, often with their necks stretched out a bit. Their ears will also be facing forward, of course, to catch every bit of juicy news. Some folks call this forward-tilting ears pose the "baseball cap." You can think of it also as Sherlock Holmes' hat (or Investigator Bunny's).

### The Language of Lagomorphs

When their curiosity is aroused, but usually before they come over to investigate personally, they'll sometimes spread their ears out to each side like a (rabbit ears) television antenna, and turn them directly ahead, to get a wide stereo field of "view." Sometimes rabbits use wide stereo ears when they're nervous too, in which case they certainly won't be stretching their necks forward, and may also turn their bodies a bit to the side in case they need to flee.

The most polite response to a curious bunny who has come over to investigate is to give it a portion of whatever it is curious about. A little something to sniff, to nibble, or to toss in the air perhaps. When a rabbit comes over and signals that it's curious, it wants to share in what you're doing. Or sometimes, as when you're cleaning a cage, to be sure that you're doing everything correctly.

Curious rabbits sometimes will rear up onto their hind limbs and stand tall to look around, which is called "periscoping." Unfortunately, they are rather bottom-heavy creatures and have a tendency to tumble over backwards when doing so. Just try not to laugh.

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"Why, Watson, I do believe we have found a clue..."



"Verrrrry interesting."

## Pleeeeeease Oh Please Please Please!

Rabbits do beg for food and affection, and it's pretty unmistakable. First the rabbit will probably come right up and stare at you expectantly, and maybe nudge you with its nose a few times. An aggressive rabbit may nip you, to make sure it has your attention. Finally, it may put its front paws on your leg and stare dolefully into your eyes. Oh yeah, that's begging alright.

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The most common reason rabbits beg is for edible treats. Every rabbit has its favorites, although of course you should only use treats that are also healthy, and in moderation. Fresh fruit and favorite vegetables and leaves, and dried fruit that doesn't have sugar added (raisins and cherries, most commonly), are all very popular. Vegetables, fruit in moderation, and lots of hay is the way to keep a rabbit healthy.

If you offer a rabbit a pickle, it will be insulted. Too much vinegar.

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"Got a raisin?"

## Yippie Skippie!

Most rabbits of all ages like to play, at least at times. In fact, rabbits exhibit some of the silliest antics and outright goofiness of any companion animal. They can be mighty wacky beasts.

Rabbits have several ways to indicate playfulness, and there are lots of things most rabbits like to do as play. Rabbits like dancing in pairs and solo (more about the latter later). You may receive an invitation to pair dance, as evidenced by your rabbit running in circles around you. This means the rabbit is basically crazy about you, and terribly happy to see you, and is a very common enthusiastic greeting. A polite response is to wait patiently for a circle or three, and then to some dancing yourself, with a little spinning, walking back and forth in front of the rabbit, or circling around it. As described later, a few hops or head-flicks are also acceptable. Note that some rabbits don't like being circled by a graceless hulk, and will get nervous, in which case you should probably just accept the dance as a gift. Dances should be concluded by offering a little grooming to your partner.

Some rather aggressive rabbits will circle you with joy, and also bite your ankles! It's worth noting that these rabbits really think a little nip is a sign of affection, and you need to train the rabbit that it's not acceptable by letting out a loud shriek and then saying "No!" This is best followed by indicating you are insulted, in a form the beast will understand (i.e. turn your back). In truth, a rabbit that bites your ankles while circling to show happiness is no different than the human dance partner who grabs your butt, thinking it's a sign of affection. Remarkably, the exact same approach works well with both species.

Another popular form of play is with toys. Acceptable play toys come in many different forms, and you'll simply have to try a lot to find out which any particular rabbit prefers. Some of the ways rabbits like to play with toys are: tossing, rolling and nudging, nibbling, shredding, climbing, digging, tunneling and burrowing. While most rabbits enjoy playing with toys, for some rabbits they're essential. If they don't have interesting toys to play with, they'll simply use whatever's around, which usually means your rugs and furniture.

Although it's not quite play, rabbits do rather enjoy eating their food. Some rabbits indicate happiness by grunting and snorting like a pig when they eat. That seems only right. Lots of rabbits toss around their hay while eating, probably because they're looking for the best bits.

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## The Need for Speed

Rabbits are fast and they know it. They love to run, including racing up and down hallways and through rooms. Some folks call this “Running the Bunny 500.” Rabbits will even work on improving their moves, by practicing quick turns in a small space. Racing rabbits are happy rabbits.

Some rabbits actually like to be chased, as they know full well that they’re much faster than you. **The language of lagomorphs** will usually sit facing sideways to you a little distance away so that it’s between you and a good racing area (e.g. a long hallway or open room). Its ears will be perked up and facing you, and it may take a quick step or two toward its getaway, then stop while watching you. A non-threatening chase can ensue (e.g. the ever popular running-while-waving-one’s-arms and saying, “I’m gonna catch you!”). The rabbit may even zig-zag as it runs, and will probably not go at full speed. A rabbit in such an invited chase will often run with its ears mostly up, while one running scared will always lay its ears back. At the end of the chase, the rabbit will sit in a comfortable place and allow you to groom him or her. If the chase was not about fun (i.e. if you really scared it), then it will probably indicate some fear and anger when you approach. Some rabbits like to be chased and others don’t.

Incidentally, when a rabbit visits you and then hops off, but stops to look at you just before moving out of view, it sometimes means you’re expected to follow (not necessarily by chasing). You can also sometimes use this signal to get your rabbit to follow you.

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## Shiver Me Timbers!

A simple rabbit expression of happiness is the “shudder.” The rabbit will lift its front legs up a bit, and shiver the skin of its chest and back by twisting rapidly. Sometimes its head and ears will twist a little too. A rabbit shudders to tell you that it is happy, hopefully with you and in general. You can think of it as a glad pat on the back for a job well done.

There does seem to be one common exception to the shudder as an endorsement of your **The Language of Lagomorphs** ~~presence~~. ~~It can be observed that rabbits confined~~ confined may give a shudder when released, presumably because they're relieved to be free of their confinement. An easy way to recognize this version is that it's often accompanied by parting foot-flicks as the rabbit hops off.

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Although our skin isn't loose enough to do a proper shudder, you can do a passable version if you are wearing a dress or long bathrobe. A quick twist of your body back and forth once or twice will make a clear statement, and is certainly a polite response to being shuddered at. Or you might prefer to respond with an even happier “head-flick” as described in the next section.

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## Did You Say Binky?

The happiest rabbit expression is commonly called a “binky.” It’s impossible to mistake for anything else, and the first time you see one you will probably wonder if the poor thing is having a convulsion. When a rabbit binkies, it jumps into the air and twists its head and body in opposite directions (sometimes twice) before falling back to the ground. This can be done while standing in one place, or while running, which is **really** weird looking, and is sometimes called the “happy bunny dance.” A rabbit can even turn 180° in midair. All **The Language of Lagomorphs** that it is happy and overall pleased with you and its life. Some rabbits binky a lot and some hardly at all, even if they are being treated well. Everyone has their own temperament.



Yipee!



Head Flick, or  
Half-Binky

A common variation, which you can easily do too, is the half-binky, also called a head flick or ear flick. Instead of twisting the whole body, just the head is quickly turned sideways and back. This is still a pretty impressive sight in a creature with ears longer than its head! A head flick can be performed while running, or when sitting in place. A head flick is similar in meaning to a shudder, but is a little more playful and silly. It differs in presentation from the “I’d rather not” ear wobble, because it’s much faster and often includes a slight rearing up by lifting the front feet.

You can do a head flick too, by quickly dropping your head sideways and then back up, with a bit of a twist. If you have long hair that gets flung, your rabbit is even more sure to get the message. Some happy rabbits will head flick back at you to show that they share your happiness. It’s always nice to answer a head flick in kind.

If you want to go for the full binky, your rabbit will understand if you jump up a little in one place while doing a head flick. I recommend you don’t try to twist your body in mid-air like a rabbit will, especially if there is any furniture around, you have a history of back problems, or are over 45 years old. Trust me on this one.

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## In the Interest of Peaceful Relations

Now that you speak fluent Rabbit, you can look forward to long intellectual conversations on the meaning of carrots and the philosophical differences between timothy and alfalfa hay. Well, maybe not. But you just may enjoy being around rabbits more, and they'll certainly be happier around you. You might even find yourself trying to binky. Just make sure not to speak Rabbit to humans who don't speak it too. They will rarely understand, sometimes will run away, and may call the police. Wearing big rabbit ears will probably

### The Language of Lagomorphs

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Final Note: I've added a page for behaviors that I think might be signals but am not sure about, and for communications that other folks have observed and that I'm still studying. If you're interested in these potential future additions to this guide, feel free to read the "[Mysterious Rabbit Behaviors](#)" page.

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Want to learn more about the rabbits shown in this guide? You can read biographies we've written for [Betsy](#) and [Marvin](#).



Don't you want to know my life story?