

# EXPRESSIONS & BODY LANGUAGE

By Kent DuFault



Photograph by Ja San Miguel

[https://unsplash.com/photos/\\_-QQuvAwQ-0](https://unsplash.com/photos/_-QQuvAwQ-0)

There is a reason that we love seeing funny expressions on animals.

**We love seeing funny and expressive animals!** That's why animal expression images are some of the most widely shared on the Internet.

Can you picture in your mind a dog happily motoring down the road with its head hanging

out the car window? It's a classic image and one that always draws smiles.

In this Creativity Prompt, we are going to discuss pet body language and expression. These assignments will test your skills.

**Pets don't sit around waiting for you, so you must be ready.**



Photograph by Elisa Schmidt

<https://unsplash.com/photos/C2c4G3by4ZE>



#### Assignment:

Photograph some pets using a car as a prop. **Don't do anything dangerous!** The goal of this Prompt is to establish a visual story between the pet and the vehicle. For example, in the first picture, a caption might read, "Nothing makes my dog Harvey happier than going for a Sunday afternoon drive." Or, in the second picture of the cat, a caption might read, "Whenever my daughter leaves the house, her cat Sindy sleeps on her car until she returns." See? Good stories make great photos! Put your mind to it and discover what 'pets with cars' photos you can dream up!

**Don't Let a Bad Background Ruin Your Shot!**





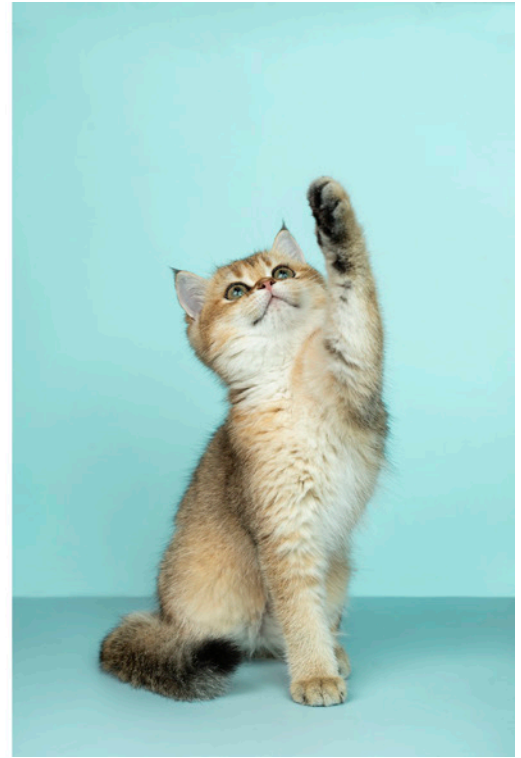
Photograph (l) by Timo Volz and (r) by Timur M

<https://unsplash.com/photos/ZlFKIG6dApg>

<https://unsplash.com/photos/SAKLELG-pO8>

Pets will do the craziest things at the oddest moments, and of course, when that happens, you just take the picture.

However, here is a simple tip that will help elevate your pet photography to a pro-level.



Photograph (l) by Kabo and Photograph (r) by Alvan Nee

<https://unsplash.com/photos/p6yH8VmGqxo>

[https://unsplash.com/photos/ZCHj\\_2IJP00](https://unsplash.com/photos/ZCHj_2IJP00)

Controlling the background eliminates distractions. In the photograph on the left, the photographer used a tool called a “paper sweep background.” A sweep background creates no horizon line, yet has depth because it does show shadows. It is typically made using a heavy paper product that comes on rolls and in different colors.

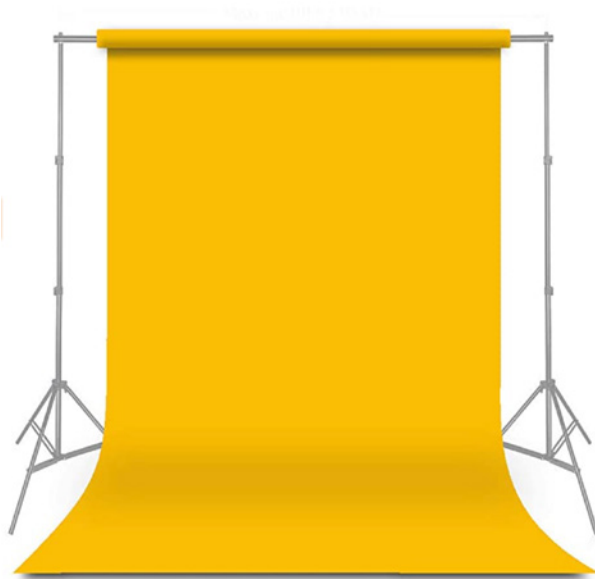
The cat portrait on the right used two boards that were spray painted. That cat is sitting on one painted board. The other board is situated vertically behind him. This method doesn’t eliminate the horizon but does give a simple, non-invasive background to a pet portrait.

Both techniques are helpful.

## Sweeping Paper

Graphic by Kent DuFault

When using sweeping paper, you roll it out and then secure both the roll and the lead end outside your camera viewing frame. Sweeping background paper can be bought at many photo stores. But an even easier method is to get it on [Amazon](#)!



Okay. Ready?



### Assignment:

This assignment will have two parts. I want you to capture the expressions and body language of your pets using any available background. As you're doing this, try and keep the background as clean and uncluttered as possible. You will have to divide your attention between several things: operating the camera, capturing peak action, and working with the background.



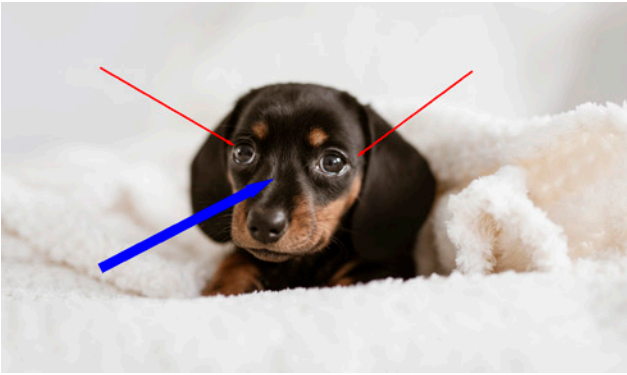
Photograph by Marko Blazevic

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/grey-kitten-on-floor-774731/>

*This photographer did an excellent job of selecting a clean, non-invasive background for this stunning cat portrait. Notice the expressive face. That makes the shot!*

For the second part of this assignment, I want you to set up a plain background. If it is in your means, I highly suggest buying a roll of background paper so that you can experience it. In place of that, you can paint some boards or cardboard. This assignment eliminates keeping track of the background because you're creating the environment.





Photographs by Dominika Roseclay

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/adorable-little-dachshund-puppy-resting-on-white-blanket-4148014/>

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/cute-dachshund-puppy-lying-on-soft-cozy-bed-4148017/>

The paper roll simplifies your job. But several things are essential. Don't be afraid to introduce a prop that adds a story element, such as this blanket for the puppy. Make sure your props are color-coordinated. Don't include bold, bright colors that attract too much attention away from the pet unless you have a good reason to do so.

Secondly, don't get lazy. Remember your fundamentals. In the left puppy photo, the eyes are entirely out of focus. The critical focus was placed on the nose, and there wasn't enough depth of field. Check your depth of field!

In the right photo, the yellow blocks indicate unnecessary background areas included in the frame. Get tight! Focus on the eyes! Capture the expressive face and body.



Photograph by Lum3n

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/closeup-photo-of-brown-and-black-dog-face-406014/>

Try framing your shots while leaving portions of the face or body out of the picture. Can you accentuate expression by leaving something out?



Photograph by Alex Andrews

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/selective-focus-photography-of-cat-8217336/>

*This photographer used a cloth backdrop, chose an unusual angle, and left out portions of the body. These decisions led to a fascinating expressive portrait of this cat, except for one thing: the focus is not on the eyes.*

**Essential:** In pet photography, this should always be your number one goal, **"Keep the eyes in focus!"**



#### Assignment:

Using your chosen background materials, try to capture unusual and compelling pet portraits by getting close and not including the entire body or face. Go for something different with your framing and posing. If necessary, you can create or enhance the effect in post-production by using the Crop Tool.

When you've completed these assignments, examine the results. Did one style work better for you than the others?

**Let's walk through a gallery of shots and determine what works and what doesn't.**





Photograph by Pixabay

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/white-short-coated-dog-160846/>

We certainly have a great expression here. It's a captivating picture.

However, I see two big problems with this shot and several minor ones. The white balance is off (icky color) and the skewed horizon is quite distracting. In addition, the red collar doesn't add a nice visual element (in this case), and the eyes are (once again) not in critical focus.

What really works in this shot is the expressiveness of the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Everything else is superficial to the moment, so let's see what we can do to increase the visual weight of those features with post-production.



Photograph by Pixabay and post-processing by Kent DuFault  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/white-short-coated-dog-160846/>

This version really pushes the eyes to the dog's face and, in particular, his snout and mouth. Here are the post-production steps.

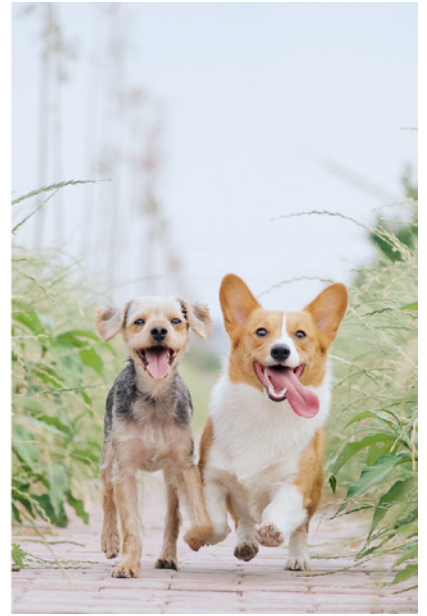
- 1 I converted to black and white using an adjust layer in Photoshop. I set the different values to increase the contrast between the dog and the background. That edit makes his body language and body shape stand out a bit more.
- 2 I cropped the image and straightened the horizon line in the background. I played around with eliminating the angled table in the foreground, but the photo lacked a sense of depth perception without it. I decided to leave a little bit in on the left.
- 3 I applied a global Clarity adjustment to increase the texture and contrast of the snout and mouth on a separate layer in Photoshop.

- 4 I applied a layer mask to the Clarity layer and painted on the mask so that it only affected the face.
- 5 I sharpened the eyes using the Sharpen Tool.
- 6 I applied a dark vignette to the background.



#### Assignment:

Create some new pet pictures or select some from your portfolio image files. Try to improve the shots in post-production. Spend some time evaluating what the core subject of the shot is going to be. In my example, it was the dog's nose and mouth. You can create your versions in color or black and white. I encourage you to try both.



Photograph (l) by Josephine Menge and Photograph (m) by Ryan Walton, and photograph (r) by Alvan Nee

<https://unsplash.com/photos/h7VBJRBcieM>

<https://unsplash.com/photos/AbNO2iejoXA>

<https://unsplash.com/photos/1VgfQdCuX-4>

The emotion of a pet becomes elevated with activity. Here are some tips for emotional activity shots.

- Make a list of activities and toys that the pet enjoys.
- Notice the time of day when they are most active.
- Be sure to bring treats.
- Limit the area that the pet can access.
- Try something new that they've never seen or attempted before.
- Remove collars unless they are necessary.
- Be aware of your camera angle. Get low, but not so low that you're staring right between their rear legs.





Photograph by Kent DuFault

A pet doesn't have to be running to be doing something.

**Critical Point:** Always **explore the possibility of backlighting**. This type of lighting will bring out the texture of fur or scales on the pet, accentuating body language.



#### Assignment:

Create a portfolio of activity pet photos. Try to use different pets. Follow the guidelines listed above. Explore using backlighting.





Photograph by Kent DuFault

Even reptiles have their favorite activities. This is my bearded dragon, Whiskers. He loves to sit by this open window and let the metal handle push against his stomach. Be alert to what activities are **unique** to the pets that you photograph!

That's some bit of body language going there! Wouldn't you agree?