

FAQS ABOUT LABELS AND LANGUAGE

● L A N G U A G E



Why do you put “pit bull” in quotes?

Through our work we have come to understand that the phrase “pit bull” means something different to everyone. Animal welfare workers don’t agree on how to define “pit bull”. Law enforcement officers don’t agree. Even dog owners don’t agree on exactly what a pit bull is! Additionally, there is no standard legal definition for “pit bull”. So, the use of that label, “pit bull” is arbitrary, subjective, and often randomly applied.

When labels are applied, correctly or not, they can carry serious consequences. No dog should be discriminated against because of a label. When a person calls a dog a “pit bull”, that dog is now saddled with a label that might get him killed in a shelter that does not adopt out “pit bulls” or kicked out of an area with Breed Specific Legislation (BSL). While we don’t have any interest in arguing about what is or isn’t a “pit bull”, we are interested in protecting all dogs labeled “pit bull” from discrimination.

Our work supports any dog experiencing discrimination based on the label “pit bull” — that is our number one goal here at Animal Farm Foundation (AFF) It doesn’t matter to us if your dog is pure bred or not, but it does matter to us if you and your dog are discriminated against because of what your dog is called. AFF is fighting discrimination for any dog labeled “pit bull.”

Isn’t pit bull a nickname for the American Pit Bull Terrier?

When we first started, “Pit Bull” was only used as the nickname for American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT), but our experience tells us that that has changed over the years.

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any dog that has a big head or muscular body (but even that is subjective!). While all of our jobs would be far easier if “pit bull” still meant a genetically coherent pure breed of dog, we have to acknowledge that it no longer does.

Does that mean there is no such thing as dog breeds or breed traits?

No way! Of course there are pure breeds of dogs bred from coherent and closed gene pools. Many pure bred dogs will possess traits typical of their pedigree. But, since “pit bull” is not a breed of dog recognized by any kennel clubs and there is no agreed upon definition for what a “pit bull” is, it is impossible to apply breed traits to this genetically incoherent group of dogs.

What’s the big deal about labels anyway?

A label will stick with a dog for the rest of its life. A label can mean discrimination, losing its home, or even death. Labels are a problem for the dogs when we, as the shelter staff (the local experts on animals), allow adopters, politicians, and community members to think that the label we assigned can predict who that dog is or will be.



FOR SHELTERS AND RESCUES:

How should we label the dogs in our shelter that we think look like “pit bulls”?

The only thing we recommend is being honest. If all you have is a visual inspection and no pedigree, then you’re guessing at a dog’s breed or breed mix when you choose to label them as “pit bulls”. Be careful not to make behavior predictions based on this guess and don’t imply that a label accurately indicates anything about a dog’s suitability for adoption or what kind of home he needs.

Didn’t AFF used to recommend certain labels, such as “pit bull type dog”? Is there a reason you no longer recommend a certain label?

Despite our best efforts, we’ve found that because of the diversity of the dogs, there just isn’t a single label that accurately describes pure bred and mixed breed dogs (other than “dog”, of course!).

We have discovered that whenever we use words like “type” or “bullies” we are implying that all dogs called “pit bulls” can be lumped into a somewhat coherent group. They cannot be. We cannot have a pit bull TYPE dog without knowing what that TYPE (pit bull) is and as we said earlier, there is no agreement on what a “pit bull” is.

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We don't even use the word terrier to describe our dogs at Animal Farm Foundation unless we have seen a particular dog display behaviors typical of breeds of dogs found in the terrier group. "Terrier" implies an expectation of behavior and we don't want to set up the dog or the adopter for failed expectations.

It certainly makes things difficult, to not have an accurate label for the dogs! We used to think that we needed to get better at breed labeling dogs, but then Dr. Victoria Voith's research showed us that we cannot get better at it. And Dr. Amy Marder and Janis Bradley taught us that there is behavior variability within each breed, and even more among breed mixes, so that we cannot possibly predict a dog's behavior based on breed alone. Each dog is an individual.

Rather than focusing on breed labeling, we're focused on educating people about the problems labels cause for dogs when they're used to predict behavior and the consequences a label can have for a dog.

But Petfinder makes us label the dogs in our shelter, even when we're not sure of the breeds. What should we do?

Petfinder.com and most shelter software will require you to guess at the breed of dog, so you don't have much choice there. But you can choose to tell your adopters that the breed label is just a guess. We don't

label the dogs on our website. And on Petfinder, where we do have to choose a breed label, we put this on all of our posts: *"Visual breed identification in dogs is unreliable so for most of the dogs we are only guessing at predominant breed or breed mix. We get to know each dog as an individual and will do our best to describe each of our dogs based on personality, not by breed label."* Please feel free to use these words on your listings too!

Should we DNA test the dogs in our shelter, to be sure?

No, we do not recommend that shelters give their dogs DNA tests to determine its breed or breed mix. Dog behavior is a complex mix of nature and nurture and knowing a dog's DNA is only one piece of the puzzle. It's just another tool in the toolbox. Shelters are in the business of adopting out companion animals and the only way to know if a dog is going to be a good companion is to get to know that individual dog. Shelters are better off spending their time and money getting to know the dogs in their care.

What if we have a dog with papers and we are sure of its breed?

If you have papers to prove your dog is a pure bred dog, by all means – call them by their breed name!