
Communicating With Your Cat (Part 2)

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In the summer issue, we learned the basic vocabulary of cat language, and how the eyes, ears, and tail “talk.” But no language is made up of merely vocabulary. In this issue, we are going to add nuance and inflection to enrich the language.

Cats talk with their whole body, not just certain parts. In addition to the signals emitted by tail, ears, and eyes, head and body position have their role to play as well. An aggressive cat will hold his head low, while a defensive cat will usually pull his head in. A head held to the side is used to indicate either submission (avoiding eye-contact) or lack of interest. The head stretched forward is inquisitive or friendly, and often used in friendly greetings. Head-bumping is a good follow-up to this friendly greeting, and is irresistible to most cat enthusiasts.

The line of the body, from head-tip to tail-tip, speaks volumes. We already discussed the tail and head, so let’s cover everything in between: **THE BACK**. You have no doubt seen a cat arch its back in the “Halloween Cat” posture, and just as you guessed, it is an aggressive posture. This is often accompanied by straightening the legs, fluffing the fur along the back, and sometimes all over the body. This plus the bottle-brush tail are an attempt to make the aggressor look bigger and meaner, so that the other cat will think twice about rising to the challenge. Chester, whom we discussed in the last issue, was notorious for this posture. A submissive cat will crouch to make himself small and unthreatening. Sometimes an agitated cat will twitch the muscles of his back, though a good itch can cause this behavior as well.

CARRIAGE Typically, the higher a cat carries himself, the more confident he is (though in an aggressive cat this may well be a bluff), while the lower a cat carries himself (such as slinking), the less confident he is. A hunting cat will crouch before an attack, both to hide and to build momentum for the strike. A cat’s anxiety level can also be measured by the way he holds himself. A relaxed cat will be loose, such as when your cat sprawls in the sun, belly up and paws in the air. A nervous cat will hold himself tight, with paws and tail tucked as close to the body as possible and belly protected. The tenser a cat’s body is, the more nervous that cat is. The tail is a great indicator here. Next time you see your cat, try “the tensivity test.” Gently pull his tail out straight from his body, and watch what it does. If it stays out, your cat is relaxed, whereas if it pops right back to the body or curls around the

nearest object, your cat is upset or nervous about something. As always, exercise caution when pulling a nervous cat’s tail!

As a prominent feature of the face, **WHISKERS** certainly have their part to play. While more commonly used as “feelers” to judge the proximity of things, such as the edges of a doorway, they also express mood to some degree. The whiskers in their relaxed state are off to the sides and slightly lowered; when perked forward they indicate interest (also used in hunting), and when pulled back they make the face appear smaller and non-threatening.

There are a number of **SMALL BEHAVIORS** that can have big meanings. For instance, a nervous cat will often lick his nose frequently to carry scent molecules to the nose.

The seemingly random act of grooming during a cat-to-cat conflict is actually an act of submission or indifference. The dominant cat might start grooming after he has asserted himself, effectively dismissing the loser.

An involuntary message of cats is the third eyelid. If the third eyelid (white inner membrane) is visible, it could mean your cat is sick or just sleepy.

KNEADING, or “making bread,” is the rhythmic stretching and constricting of the paws. The behavior originates in nursing kittenhood, when the kitten kneads the area around the nipple to stimulate milk flow. A female in heat will also often knead. Kneading in a cat is a sign of happiness.

And what about **PURRING**? Purring is one of the great mysteries of the cat universe. No one fully understands where it comes from, how they do it, or why. We do know that cats purr when they are happy and when they are sick. Mothers purr during labor, and kittens learn to purr within days of birth. Mothers seem to use it as a means of communicating with their young, especially before their kittens’ sight and smell are fully developed. Some believe that cats purr to heal themselves. A purr is 25 to 150 hertz (an idling diesel engine is 26 hertz; the bass in your stereo ranges 40 to 150 hertz). These frequencies have been found to improve bone density and promote healing.

Body language is a complicated and often unconscious form of communication. There is no one indicator of your cats’ message. To accurately “read” your cat, you must take in all the cues from head to tail to come to an overall conclusion of what your cat is telling you. 🐾