



Cat Chat: Understanding Feline Language

Meows, yowls and other vocalizations are just some of the ways your cat lets you know how they're feeling.

You and your cat might speak different languages, but you can still communicate with each other.

Important clues such as the look in your cat's eyes, the tone of their voice, the position of their ears and the motion of their tail can reveal their feelings and intentions. You can learn to read these signals so you'll get a good idea of what's on your cat's mind.

Vocalizing: Your cat has something to talk about

You'll learn a lot when you can interpret your cat's wide vocabulary of chirps and meows. They'll tell you when it's time to get up (at least in your cat's opinion), when they're feeling affectionate and if they're feeling threatened or are in pain.

"Meow" is an all-purpose word. Your cat may be saying "meow" as a greeting ("Hey, how ya doin'?"), a command ("I want up, I want down, More food now"), an objection ("Touch me at your own risk") or an announcement ("Here's your mouse"). Some people have watched their cats walking around the house meowing to themselves.

Chirps and trills are how a mother cat tells their kittens to follow them. Aimed at you, it probably means your cat wants you to follow them, usually to their food bowl. If you have more than one cat, you'll often hear them converse with each other this way.

Purring is a sign of contentment (usually). Cats purr whenever they're happy, even while they're eating. Sometimes, however, a cat may purr when they're anxious or sick, using their purr to comfort themselves.

Growling, hissing or spitting indicate a cat who is annoyed, frightened, angry or aggressive. Leave this cat alone.

A yowl or howl (like loud, drawn-out meows) tell you your cat is in some kind of distress—stuck in a closet, looking for you or in pain. Find your cat if they're making this noise. However, in unneutered and unspayed cats, these sounds are part of mating behavior (and very annoying). And if your cat is elderly, they may be suffering from a cognitive disorder (dementia) and may howl because they're disoriented.

Chattering, chittering or twittering are the noises your cat makes when they're sitting in the window watching birds or squirrels. Some experts think that this is an exaggeration of the "killing bite," when a cat grabs their prey by the neck and works their teeth through the bones to snap them.

Body language: Your cat speaks with their whole body

Does your cat arch their back up to meet your hand when you pet them? This means they're enjoying this contact with you. Do they shrink away under your slightest touch? Save the petting for later: They're not interested right now.

Pay attention to your cat's eyes, ears, body and tail—they're all telling the story. Here are some basic (though sometimes contradictory) clues:

Ears

- Forward: alert, interested or happy
- Backward, sideways, flat ("airplane ears"): irritable, angry or frightened
- Swiveling: attentive and listening to every little sound

Eyes

- Pupils constricted: offensively aggressive, but possibly content
- Pupils dilated (large): nervous or submissive (if somewhat dilated), defensively aggressive (if fully dilated), but possibly playful

Tail

- Erect, fur flat: alert, inquisitive or happy
- Fur standing on end: angry or frightened
- Held very low or tucked between legs: insecure or anxious
- Thrashing back and forth: agitated. The faster the tail, the angrier the cat
- Straight up, quivering: excited, really happy. If your cat hasn't been neutered or spayed, they could be getting ready to spray something.

Body

- Back arched, fur standing on end: frightened or angry
- Back arched, fur flat: welcoming your touch
- Lying on back, purring: very relaxed
- Lying on back, growling: upset and ready to strike

Rubbing

When your cat rubs their chin and body against you, they're telling you they love you, right? Well, sort of. What they're really doing is marking their territory. You'll notice that they also rub the chair, the

door, their toys, everything in sight. They're telling everyone that this is their stuff, including you. But they do love you, too.

Kneading

This is sometimes called "making biscuits," because the cat works their paws on a soft surface as if it they're kneading bread dough. It's a holdover from kittenhood, when a nursing kitten massaged their mother's teats to make milk flow. Your cat does this when they are really happy.

The Flehmen response

Have you noticed times when your cats—perhaps while sniffing your shoe—lifts their head, opens their mouth slightly, curls back their lips and squints their eyes? They're not making a statement about how your shoe smells; they're gathering more information.

Your cat's sense of smell is so essential to them that they actually have an extra olfactory organ that very few other creatures have: the Jacobson's organ. It's located on the roof of their mouth behind their front teeth and is connected to the nasal cavity.

When your cat gets a whiff of something really fascinating, they open their mouth and inhale so that the scent molecules flow over the Jacobson's organ. This intensifies the odor and provides more information about the object they're sniffing. What they do with that information, well, we'll never know.

A Key to Your Cat's Moods

Wondering if your cat is happy, meditating or having a bad day? Here are some tips:

Content: Sitting or lying down, eyes half-closed, pupils narrowed, tail mostly still, ears forward and purring—a really happy cat will often knead on a soft surface.

Playful: Ears forward, tail up, whiskers forward and pupils somewhat dilated—playing is hunting behavior; your cat may stalk their prey (a toy, a housemate or you), then crouch down with their rear end slightly raised. A little wiggle of the butt, then...pounce! Your cat will grab their prey, bite it, wrestle it the floor and kick it with their hind feet: Their toy is now dead.

Irritated or over-stimulated: Pupils dilated, ears turned back and tail twitching or waving—your cat may growl or put their teeth on you as a warning to cease and desist. Intense play can quickly turn into overstimulation in some cats, resulting in biting and scratching.

Nervous or anxious: Ears sideways or back, pupils dilated and tail low or tucked between legs—your cat may slink through the house close to the floor, looking for somewhere to hide. They may turn their face to the wall to shut the world out.

Frightened or startled: Think Halloween cat—ears back and flat against their head, whiskers back, back arched, fur standing on end and tail erect or low. They may yowl, growl, hiss and spit.

Defensive: Crouched, ears flattened, whiskers back, tail between their legs or wrapped around their body, and pupils dilated—they may meow loudly, growl, hiss and spit.

Angry, aggressive: Ears back, pupils very constricted, and their tail may be up or down with the fur standing on end—an aggressive cat will stare down another cat and growl or yowl until the other cat gives way. Cats don't really want to fight; they prefer standoffs, but this can progress to fighting if one of the cats doesn't back down.

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About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.