

Feline Body Language

Cats have a language all their own, communicating their desire for closeness or space largely through their vocalizations and behaviour. If we can understand their messages, we can strengthen our relationships with them by responding appropriately.

The 5 basics

Tail

When your cat approaches you with their tail high up in the air, that means they are interested in a friendly interaction. However, if their tail is down or tightly wrapped to their body, that usually means they are frightened or feel insecure. The motion of your cat's tail communicates quite a lot as well; quivering from base to tip means your cat is excited to see you, thrashing from side to side means they are annoyed, and twitching the tip means they are intrigued by what is going on.

Ears

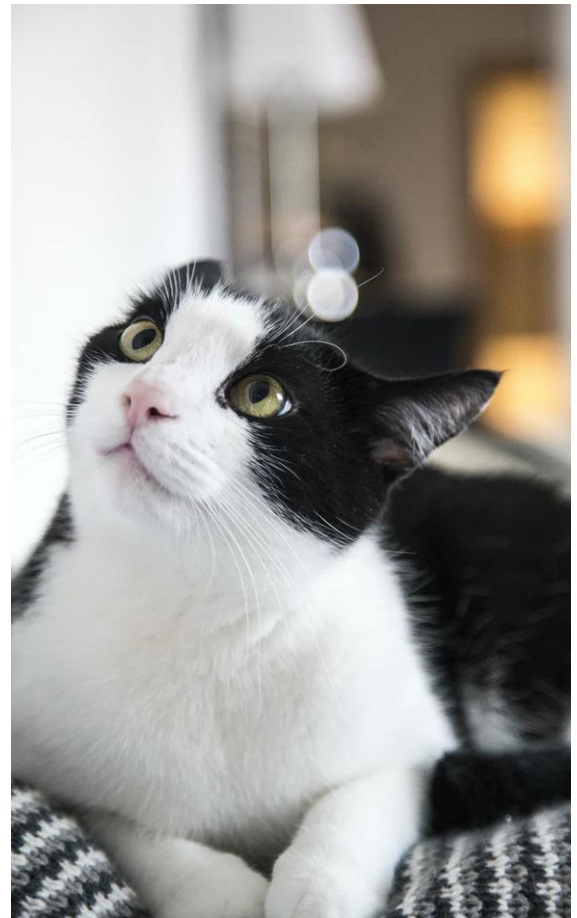
Cats can communicate a broad range of emotions through their ears. If they are forward facing, this is usually a good sign – forward and perked means alert, while forward and relaxed means comfortable. If your cat's ears are slightly to the side, or rotating around, this means that they are feeling slightly intimidated. If you see this, it is best to make yourself seem as non-threatening as possible. When you see a cat with its ears pressed tightly to the back of its head, they are terrified, and it is best to give them some space. When a cat holds its ears in “airplane mode” that is usually a sign of irritation. This irritation can be mild or extreme. It is best to consider the context when deciding how to adjust your behaviour.

Eyes

A cat's pupils tend to enlarge when they are aroused. This can either be excitement (like chasing their favorite toy!) or fear. On the other hand, they often narrow their pupils when they are feeling aggressive. If a cat is comfortable, they are likely to alternate between looking casually at you and looking away. If they are feeling insecure, they are more likely to stare directly at you, or avoid eye contact altogether. Finally, the tension of a cat's eye can reveal a lot about a state of mind – a relaxed eyelid equals a relaxed cat, while a wide eye equals a fearful cat.

Body

When a cat is feeling tense their muscles reflect that. They often try to make themselves seem bigger to scare the threat, or smaller to communicate that they are not a threat. Additionally, they tend to protect their sensitive paw pads by keeping their feet square on the floor... which also means they are ready to run quickly if necessary. Finally, an arched back can be a clear sign of a distressed kitty.



Vocalizations

Did you know the classic cat meow is reserved for communicating with humans? It typically means they want something (food, petting, play, etc.) and they have learned that this sound usually works. They also chirrup as a friendly greeting, chatter when excited (usually when looking at prey species) and growl/hiss/or moan when frightened or irritated. The purr is among the least understood of cat vocalizations. While they certainly do this when they are content, they also have been found to do this when they are ill or injured.

