

30 Ways Your Cat Speaks to You

How many of these 8 different vocal messages, 10 facial expressions, and 12 types of body language do you recognize in your furry friend? By understanding all the ways your cat tries to communicate with you, you can't help but deepen your bond with her.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Understanding your cat's vocalizations, facial expressions, and body language can help you learn his communication patterns and ultimately deepen your bond with him
- Cats have a wide range of vocalizations — some indicate happiness, others tell you kitty is feeling fearful, anxious, or angry
- Your cat's eyes, ears, back, and tail can also give clues as to how she's feeling and what she might need from you

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Cats have a reputation for being silent and difficult to know, unlike dogs, who are typically much more vocal and physically demonstrative. Of course, some cats are more outspoken than others and as their guardians will attest, do indeed communicate with their meows and other vocalizations.

Whether your feline friend is a chatty cat or the strong silent type, learning about his body language, behavior, and the sounds he makes can deepen the bond you share with him, and improve communication between you.

The good news is that it's not really that difficult to learn to read many of Tiger's communication signals, including what that look in his eyes means, or the tone of his meow, or the position of his ears, or the way he's holding or moving his tail.

Interpreting Your Cat's Vocalizations

Cats actually have a rather extensive repertoire of vocalizations. You may know the difference between your cat's dinnertime meow, for example, and the way she sounds if she's frightened or annoyed. But many kitty sounds and intonations are more subtle and don't fit a particular pattern, which can make them harder to interpret. Here's a cheat sheet for decoding some common kitty chatter:¹

Vocalization	How It Sounds	What It Means	Translation
Meow	The classic mee-yoww	Usually just a shout-out to whoever is around	"Hey there!"
Purr	Similar to a low idling motor; made by contracting the muscles of the larynx	A sign of contentment in most cats; rarely, a sign of anxiety or illness	"Backrub feels great ... don't stop!"
Murmur	Soft rhythmic "thump" made on exhalation	A request or greeting	"Pet me?"
Growl, hiss, spit	Low-pitched, severe, "I mean business" sound	Kitty is feeling fearful, stressed, defensive, or aggressive	"Back off!"
Shriek or screech	High-pitched, loud, harsh scream	Kitty is either in pain or about to cause some	"Ouch!" "Don't touch me!" "Get away from me!"
Chatter	Teeth chattering; jaw vibrating	Feline hunting sound; frustration from being unable to hunt visible prey	"Let me at it ... let me at it ... let me at it!"
Howl or yowl	Loud, drawn out calls	Cognitive dysfunction in older cats; aggression; distress	"Where are you?" "Where am I?" "Why am I yelling?"
Moan	Long, low, throaty cry	Prelude to vomiting, bringing up a hairball	"Get here quick I'm about to make a mess!"

Reading Feline Facial Expressions

Now let's take a look at Miss Kitty's facial expressions, because they are also important in understanding her moods and how she's feeling:²

Facial Feature	How It Looks	What It Means
Eyes	Constricted pupils	Kitty is either content, or he's on the offensive and could become aggressive
	Slightly dilated pupils	Kitty is feeling nervous and/or submissive
	Fully dilated pupils	Either defensively aggressive, or aroused and feeling playful
Ears	Angled forward	It's all good (kitty is feeling alert, interested, happy, and/or relaxed)
	Erect and turned so the opening points to the side	Irritable, stressed, and/or potentially aggressive
	Flattened, tipped backward, or sideways	Fearful, frightened, irritable, and/or stressed
	Pivoting	Kitty is alert, attentive, and/or listening to every sound
Mouth	Closed	Kitty is relaxed
	Open tight with teeth showing, or wide open with hissing or spitting	Indicates fear and potential aggression
	Slightly open with flicking tongue and lips curled back slightly	Kitty smells something unfamiliar

Understanding Your Cat's Body Language

Finally, the way your cat holds his body can also give you information about how he's feeling and whether he might need reassurance, some space, or a nice kitty massage:³

Body Part	How It Looks	What It Means
Back	Arched with fur standing on end	Kitty is very fearful and defensively aggressive
	Arched with flat fur	Kitty is asking to be petted, stroked
	Lying on back purring	Relaxed and looking for a tummy rub ... or maybe not
	Lying on back growling and visibly upset	Prepare to be scratched or bitten
Head	Held high	Kitty may be feeling neutral, confident, happy ... or aggressive
	Low or pulled toward the back	Fearful, submissive
Tail	Erect, with fur laying flat	Kitty is alert, curious, and/or happy
	Horizontal	Either relaxed or unsure
	Vertical and quivering	Kitty is feeling happy, excited, and may be about to urine mark
	Vertical, tense, with fur standing on end	Angry or frightened
	Held very low or tucked between legs	Kitty is feeling insecure, anxious, and/or fearful
	Jerking back and forth	Kitty is not happy and potentially aggressive

Sources and References

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^{1,2,3} dvm360, April 15, 2015