BEHAVIOR

Cat Body Language: How to Read a Cat's Tail, Ears, Eyes and Posture

What a cat's tail, ears, eyes, whiskers, posture and sounds mean when it is happy, playful, frightened or about to lash out, what a slow blink means, and how to approach a frightened or community cat.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 28, 2026 • 7 min read • 5 cited sources

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The short answer

A relaxed cat holds its ears up and forward, its body loose and its tail up, and it may blink slowly at you. A frightened cat makes itself small: crouched low, ears turned back, tail tucked in, pupils wide. A cat that feels it may have to fight makes itself big, with its back arched and its fur on end. Hissing and growling are warnings to back off, and a thrashing tail means the cat is annoyed or about to lash out.

No single signal tells you everything. Cats communicate with their posture, tail, ears, head and eyes, by touch, by sound and by scent, as the Feline Veterinary Medical Association (FelineVMA, formerly the American Association of Feline Practitioners) describes. Read the signals together, and with what is going on around the cat: wide pupils can mean fear, play or just a dim room.

AT A GLANCE

- A slow blink is friendly.
- With a frightened cat, move slowly, crouch or sit sideways, and avoid staring: a hard stare can read as a threat.
- Feed a community cat at the same time and place every day; trust builds with routine.

Moods at a glance

WHAT A CAT'S BODY SAYS

Signal	Happy or relaxed	Stressed or frightened	About to lash out
Tail	Straight up, often with a curl at the tip	Held close to the body, or wrapped tightly around or under it	Flicking or thrashing
Ears	Upright and facing forward	Turned to the sides ("airplane ears") or back; the further back, the more frightened	Turned back or flat against the head
Eyes	Round or half closed, pupils narrow; slow blinks	Wide, with big pupils	Wide with big pupils, or narrowed and staring at the threat
Whiskers	Loose and curved	Pushed forward when stressed; pulled back flat against the face when frightened	Flat against the cheeks, or pushed forward
Body	Loose; lying stretched out, maybe showing the belly, kneading or cuddling up	Stiff, tense and low to the ground, or crouched to look small	Back arched and fur standing on end, to look as big as possible
Sounds	Purring; a trill or a meow to greet you or ask for something	Hissing and growling, warning you to back off	A long yowl and a shriek, or a spit with a lunge or swat

From PetMD's guide by Alison Gerken, DVM, DACVB, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist; relaxed whiskers from the Feline Grimace Scale. Pupils also widen in dim light and in play, so read the whole cat.

The tail

- Straight up, often with a curl at the tip: a reliable sign of a happy, confident cat.
- Flicking from side to side while the cat watches something: it is focused on hunting or play. Flicking when there is nothing to stalk usually means it is annoyed: stop petting and give the cat space.
- Held close to the body, or thrashing and thumping: stressed or annoyed.
- Wrapped tightly around or under the body: frightened. Sick cats and cats in pain hold their tails this way too.
- Puffed up like a bottle brush, with the fur on end: a frightened cat making itself look bigger. Back away and let it calm down.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: Ears and whiskers, Eyes, and the slow blink, Body and posture and 4 more sections, plus the Cat Body Language Chart. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/decoding-cat-body-language-guide

Sources

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