

What Your Cat Is Really Trying To Tell You

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Cats have a reputation for being mysterious and difficult to understand. Why do they just sit for hours and stare off into space? Why do they bite us when we just pet them sitting in our laps? Why do they pee on our stuff? We don't have quick answers for these questions. Animal behaviorists are still working to try to understand the different communication signals of cats. Our knowledge of cats still lags way behind our knowledge of dog behavior but recent studies have shed light on some of their mysterious ways.

One interesting study looked at the tail-up posture of cats and what it means. When cats approach people or other cats in a non-aggressive way, their tails are usually straight up in the air, with the tip moving slowly or curled slightly. It has been assumed that this is a friendly signal to other cats or people, but to prove it, Dr. Charlotte Cameron-Beaumont of the University of Southampton presented cats with cardboard silhouettes of cats with the tails either up or down and then looked at their reactions. Cats were more likely to approach the tail-up silhouettes quickly, in a friendly manner and with their own tails up. The silhouettes with the tail down were not approached as rapidly or in as friendly a manner.

Other research has shown that cats approaching a person or cat (or being approached by a person or cat) will often flop down in front of them and roll on their backs. This seems to be a friendly behavior that signals "I am no threat to you" and usually allows the cats to stay near the person or cat.

Meowing by cats has also received recent attention by researchers. As most cat owners know, the sound of the meow can be quite variable. Different cats may give very different sounding meows and even the same cat may give different meows at different times. Interestingly, meowing is rarely used in communication between cats. Mothers and kittens frequently meow at each other but adult cats don't do it very often. Meowing is mostly directed to people by adult cats and it seems to act to get our attention. Cats seem to learn to do this to get our attention and the different kinds of meows are also learned.

Our cat Buffett communicates with us in all these ways. He frequently greets us by approaching us with his tail up, meowing and then flopping down and rolling in our path. It's a very effective way to get us to stop and pay attention to him. In his own kitty way, he is showing his friendliness and affection.