



Introducing Cats

When introducing a new cat into the home, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it can be a slow process, so be patient. While some cats may hit it off immediately, the majority will not, and it could take days to even months before a successful introduction is complete. Following the steps below will give you the best chance at success, but remember that the timeline and pace you move at is ultimately up to your cats, so listen to what they are telling you and let them guide you.

Before Bringing Your New Cat Home

1. Establish separate Base Camps. Base camp is a defined area of your home that is the heart of your cat's territory. It is a place of safety and familiarity. Base camp should be a room that you spend time in: a socially meaningful space where you can mingle your scent with your cat's. This could be the master or a spare bedroom, an office, or even the bathroom when there is no other option. As long as the human scent is strong, it will help the cat establish a sense of home by comingling scents. Conversely, a laundry room, garage, or basement is not a great place to set up base camp, since these are not rooms you likely want to spend a lot of time in, and they probably don't smell strongly of you. You may not want your master bedroom to be the new cat's base camp. If your resident cats sleep with you, you don't want to kick them out of that "home within the home." No place smells more like you than your bed. You might be setting up your cats for a rocky start. Some essentials for your Base Camps are:
 - Signposts: These are objects that signify territorial ownership for your cat. By definition, a signpost is something your cat has left a visual sign on, such as scratching posts, litter boxes, and cat beds.
 - Scent soakers: These are soft items that absorb a cat's scent, and can also serve as a signpost. They say "I live here," and allow for rubbing, scratching, or lying in. Beds, blankets, carpets, cardboard scratchers, and scratching posts are all excellent scent soakers.
 - No holes in the walls or the ceiling where they make be able to get stuck
 - Nothing breakable on a shelf or ledge that they may able to knock off
 - No clothing or other fabric materials that cannot be replaced if scratched, etc.
2. Urban planning maximizes the potential for discovery, time-sharing, and space-sharing required for cats to get to know each other, and makes the whole transitional period as noncompetitive as possible.
 - **Block off all the "unders" (under the bed, under the couch, under the TV, etc...).** Think about where potential ambushes could occur, or where a scared cat might burrow away, not to be seen for days on end. "**Unders**" promote a sense of insecurity and "**smallness**" in cats, whereas hiding holes (like covered beds or boxes) in places up off the floor or underneath things (preferably on top of trees or perches) promotes a sense of confident and security with the cat's surroundings and cohabitants.
 - The way cats perceive territory is floor to ceiling, 360 degrees. Make sure you're giving equal emphasis to different spots on the vertical axis as the horizontal axis. This is because you don't know who this new cat's going to be, but you want to give her the ability to find her confidence

somewhere. More vertical space allows cats even more... well, space, to spread out and get to know each other from a distance.

- Be sure you have a “Cat Superhighway” around the most crucial social space—usually the living room or the bedroom. The Superhighway creates multiple lanes of traffic, with various on and off ramps, using design elements like shelving, cat trees, and window beds, to provide vertical breathing room. Both cats having the ability to get from one end of the room to the other without having to touch the ground is best. As the superhighway takes care of the sky, tunnels and cocoons help “catify” the floor... along with litter box placement that prevents ambush and doesn’t create dead ends.

Scent and Site Swapping

Make sure your resident cat is temporarily tucked away in a back bedroom or someplace where he will not see you bringing your new cat into the house, then proceed directly to the new base camp. Once the door is closed, open up the carrier door and allow your new cat to come out and explore the room. It may take seconds or it may take hours for your new cat to come out of the carrier. Just allow them to come out at their own pace. Get your new cat settled in as best as you can, keeping in mind that *anything you can bring along from the shelter or her foster home that has her scent on it—bedding, blanket, toys, etc.—is a high-value bonus for her comfort and acclimation process.*

One of the hallmarks of this integration method is that ***the new cat and the resident will not initially lay eyes on each other.*** Therefore, the main purpose of this isolation phase is to gradually introduce the cats through scent before they actually see each other. This might seem odd, but let me assure you: this is a nonnegotiable. I’ve noticed that some folks find this to be counterintuitive, since they presume the “mystery” of what the other cat looks like might create even more angst. But actually, this scent-before-sight protocol makes for a much more predictable and harmonious introduction, because they can become familiar with each other prior to any visual assessment.

To this end, there are a few things we can do to help this “getting to know you” process along:

1. Scent Swapping - This is one of the most nonthreatening ways to get one cat’s scent in front of the other, and it’s as simple as it sounds.
 - “Gift” for the Resident: You will take a “scent soaker” from the newcomer’s base camp—a blanket, soft fabric toy (that most easily retains her scent), or even something like a doughnut bed—and temporarily place it near the resident cat for his inspection. (You can also gently rub a clean sock or washcloth around the face of the cat to pick up scent that way, then use it as a “scent soaker,” provided that she doesn’t mind you doing that.)
 - “Gift” for the Newcomer: You will take a scent soaker from the resident cat and place it near the newcomer. In both cases, the key is not to force her to smell the item, but to let her explore it at her own pace. And don’t worry, she will get to it, and it will accelerate the initiation process. Think of scent swapping as another type of “remote handshake.”
2. Signposts - Take a more significant item from the new cat’s base camp (like a cat tree) and place it out in the living room, in a major window. This allows your resident to mark the base camp piece with his own scent, establishing a peaceful co-signpost in the home.

3. Site Swapping - Once your new cat appears to be comfortable, sitting at the window watching birds and not army crawling, hiding under things, or jumping every time the door's opened, it's time for site swapping. Site swapping allows each cat to explore the other's territory without ever laying eyes on each other. This is also an opportunity for key signposts—like cat trees, litter boxes, etc.—to take on a shared scent. You site swap on alternating days so no one owns too much land. But you also site swap because if a cat is locked up all day, his energy can build up into a potential “cat bomb.” Here's how it would unfold:
 - 1) Carry the newcomer out of their base camp, put her in the bathroom, and shut the door.
 - 2) Allow the resident cat to walk into the newcomer's base camp, then shut that door.
 - 3) Allow the newcomer to explore the rest of the home.
 - 4) Rinse and repeat.

Make sure that you're swapping back at predictable times during the day, so you're not asking your existing cat to be in a closed space for extended periods or asking the newcomer to sleep around the rest of the house all night long, right off the bat.

Shared Mealtimes

Set up dinner plates – one for the newcomer, one for the resident – at an equal and respectful distance from your “feeding door.” Make sure that there's plenty of space on both sides of the door. Using the base camp door as your main feeding door is usually the best way to do it. All feeding should now be done on opposite sides of the new cat's room door. This will help create positive associations with each cat and their scents.

As for the “respectful distance,” that's basically defined as the minimal distance each of the cats need to be from the door in order to walk up to the dish, eat, and walk away, without feeling the need to look around, run up to and bat the door, or swat, hiss, or engage in any other shenanigans that occur when cats are stressed out. This distance, at least initially, becomes the sweet spot at which each cat is aware of, but not threatened or distracted by, the other one. When your cats are introduced to each other via this “remote handshake,” they smell food every time they meet. And the only time they smell food, they're engaged in that handshake. This is what building positive associations is all about: other cat = food = good.

Once you've identified that “safe” distance, it essentially becomes your cat's Challenge Line. From there, every meal becomes a step of one paw over the line – by getting each plate incrementally closer to the door, and thus closing the distance between both diners, the cats get increasingly comfortable with one another . . . all while they are enjoying their food.

If you've moved the bowls closer and you see that one or both cats stare at the door, start to flick or wag their tail, and show irritability, you are likely on the wrong side of the Challenge Line, and your cat will just decide that dinner is more trouble than it's worth. If this happens, move the food back and find that sweet spot again. (I recommend using painter's tape to mark that spot on both sides of the door. Defining that Challenge Line visually is actually a great way of marking your cat's progress, and yours.)

The goal is to get as close to that closed door as possible, with the same predictable result each time. Don't move that Challenge Line until you get total compliance; there must be no shenanigans whatsoever. Once you've had two or three meals where there's no response at all, it's time to move the line closer. But, don't get overzealous and move your line so much that someone freaks and sends you back to square one. Slow and steady definitely wins the race on this one.

Once you get to the point where the cats are eating every meal about a foot away from either side of the door and walking away without issue, then it's time to allow visual access!

With both cats now acutely aware of the other's scent, it's time to let the cats actually see other. The work that you've done up to this point has resulted in predictable behavior between the two cats and a cordial (or, at least tolerant) "scent handshake" at every meal. It's a mistake, though, to assume that they will be just as cordial once the visual element is introduced. Instead, begin at the beginning and reset the Challenge Line:

1. Initial Eye Contact: Take the feeding line all the way back to where they can see one another and eat with little or no disruption. And now, do the Challenge Line process all over again. But first, you have a choice to make. Do you simply crack the base camp door, or set up a pet gate or screen door?
 - Option One: It's often fine to just crack the door. You can grab a couple of those triangular rubber door stoppers from any hardware store and place one either side of the door (to guarantee that no one's going to swing that door open). Or a hook-and-eye door latch also works just fine to keep the door slightly ajar. There should be only enough space that if some kind of swatting or swiping breaks out, it can happen with no damage done.
 - Option Two: The best option here is usually to introduce the cats by either using a pet gate or a screen door. A pet gate works better than a baby gate because pet gates are high and have a walk-through door in them, so that the human doesn't have to disassemble the base camp door every time he wants to cross that threshold.
2. Raising the Curtain: Once you've decided on whether to use a pet gate or screen door, drape a blanket over that gate or use clothespins to hang it from the screen. This gives you a much greater sense of control over the degree of visual access because you can "raise the curtain" gradually over a period of time. The curtain allows you to start with the absolute bare minimum of visual access. For many cats, this added layer of security makes all the difference in giving them the confidence they need to take that next paw over their Challenge Line.

Shared Playtime

Once the cats are eating meals within a few inches of each other, it's time to move to the ultimate reward: playtime! To prepare, have Your Sight Blockers Ready —A Sight Blocker is something that: (a) the cats can't see through; (b) is solid enough that you can place it between them and they can't bust through it, and (c) is high enough that you don't have to bend down to place it between the two cats and your hands are out of the "danger zone" should a fight break out. Flattened and taped-up cardboard boxes of the appropriate height have always worked best for me, or you could try a thick piece of foam core. Don't use a blanket or something flimsy. They'll just run through it.

When you see that first sign of doom—usually it's the moment at which movement stops and the staredown starts—it's game over: sight blocker down. If you can't control them with toys and treats, lead them away. Use the sight blocker to guide someone out of the room. Your goal is to end everything on a high note, or at least not a low note.

Now choose the common-area room in which to have the joint session. This should be the largest room with the most amount of empty space; a crowded, smaller room gives the cats too many things to focus on and too many opportunities to get away from you and to get at each other. Next, enlist the help of a friend, significant other, family member, etc. Again, I am always a proponent of having human partners to aid in these introduction steps, but this exercise, specifically, is one you just can't do solo. **The objective is to keep both cats moving in big, opposing circles. Momentum is on equal par with engagement during this exercise, and, likewise, stasis is our greatest enemy.**

Begin by playing with only one cat in the room at first. Make sure he is engaged, and keep him moving. If you are dispensing treats, get that bread-crumbs trail going; as he is chewing one, you put the next one down where he can see it, so that he is moving toward his next goal as he's finishing the previous one. The same goes for toys; you need to be in control of your cat's head—the rest will follow. In times of potential staredowns, nothing is more your friend than your ability to move your cat's eyes where you want them to look.

Casually have your partner bring the other cat into the room and immediately engage her. In a perfect world, you would lead the cat into the space with whatever their favorite reward is, whether that is food, a toy, etc. This way you are not creating that extra static energy on your cat's part of being carried into the space. You should, as always, make her feel that she is making all her own decisions. The most important component when you bring the cats together is establishing and maintaining a rhythm of play once they hit the room.

In a perfect world, the session would end by leading them both out of the room with a toy. If that decision, however, is looking like it's going to be a messy one, and if you need to pick up one of the cats and bring him into another room before the cats take action on that decision, then that's what you do. Again, always try to end on a positive note though. Remember, you are trying to create positive associations, which is a check we can cash only with consistent, positive endings. For this reason, always end the sequence with mealtime. They will already have an established positive response to each other with mealtimes.

If Introduction Process is Unsuccessful

For cats who still do not get along and are showing continued or increasing stress after going through the protocol, including taking each step slowly and back tracking to previous steps, you may want to consider anti-anxiety medication during the introduction process. This will need to come at the recommendations of both a behaviorist and veterinarian, or a veterinary behaviorist.

If all else does not work and your cats are unable to live calmly and comfortably together, then rehoming your new cat may be your best option, as living together can be very stressful and result in a poor quality of life or create additional behavior/medical problems. Some cats are happier living as the only cat in the home, and if this turns out to be the case, then we should note that information, and respect and do what is best for each cat.

References

Galaxy, Jackson. "Cat Introductions."

<https://www.jacksongalaxy.com/blog/cat-introductions-part-1-before-the-introduction/>