



# READING POKER TELLS

ZACHARY ELWOOD



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## **Reading Poker Tells**

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# Preface

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I believe this book will be, at the time of its publication, the best resource on poker tells available. I've filled this book with practical information that I've learned from more than eight years of playing live poker professionally and semi-professionally. I've done my best to make this a book that will improve almost any player's game, no matter their skill level or the stakes that they play.

There are many ways poker players unwittingly give clues about the strength of their hands. In this book are many common physical and verbal tells that I frequently rely on to read my opponents. Many of these concepts are well-known to professional poker players, but have never been written about before in such a thorough way.

This book also presents an original way of thinking about tells. My system organizes poker tells into situational categories, giving you a framework for thinking about the behavior you see at the table. These categories will help you understand how tells that look the same can mean different things in different situations. I think my way of thinking about tells will improve your tell-reading abilities.

There's also a section on manipulation and deception. This section includes maneuvers meant to influence your opponents, or to induce them to give away information. Many people will consider some of these strategies immoral or "angle-shooting." Even if you don't plan on using these maneuvers, they're worth knowing so that you can recognize them if your opponents use them.

I've put a lot of effort into organizing the content in this book because I want readers to understand these concepts as easily as possible. In the poker tells section, I give examples of how the tells can be used in actual hands so you can better understand the concepts. There are also many cross-references throughout the book, which should help you navigate and find what you're looking for.

If you are going to read this book, I highly recommend you check out my blog at <http://www.readingpokertells.com>. The blog talks about a lot of the things I discuss in this book, often going into a lot more detail and using televised hands and hands that I've played. I also receive questions from people and try to answer them. So if you like this book I think you would really enjoy the blog. You can email me your questions, thoughts, and criticisms at <mailto:info@readingpokertells.com>.

## ***Who is this book for?***

This book is mainly for people who play live poker or who want to transition from online to live poker.

You'll get the most out of this book if you're already an experienced, winning player. That being said, I think anyone who regularly plays live poker, no matter the stakes, would benefit from reading this book. If you're a very experienced live player with a high win rate, you probably won't get much from this book, but there may be a few concepts that are new to you.

Even if you aren't a winning player yet, you'd do well to realize how much information you might be giving away. If it does nothing else, I hope this book will convince you of the importance of concealing your own tells.



This book is also for anyone interested in human psychology. I think a lot of the behavioral concepts in this book apply to any competitive setting where deception is an important factor.

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### ***Using this book***

You shouldn't think of this book as hard and fast rules for interpreting your opponents' actions, but instead like a book on martial arts. You can learn a lot about theory and about important physical maneuvers from a martial arts book. You might even learn a good technical way to punch somebody or chop a brick in half. But a book won't teach you how to kick someone's ass. You'll need to get out there and actually fight people to learn how to do that.

Reading this book will get you thinking in the language of physical tells and will mentally prepare you for spotting them and interpreting them in the real world. But there is no substitute for playing.

### ***Games***

I use Texas Hold'em throughout this book for hand examples, just because it's a simple, common game, but you should be able to extrapolate most concepts to other games.

### ***Photographs***

While it may be tempting to flip through the photos in this book to see what the most obvious poker tells are, I don't recommend doing that. I consider the photos the least-relevant information in this book, which is unfortunate because photos are eye-catching and they are what many people tend to concentrate on the most. But using poker tells practically is, for the most part, about studying behavioral patterns that occur over time; it is not about how someone looks at a specific, frozen moment in time.

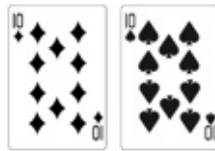
Video is a much better tool, because it can show you a person's behavior over time. (This is why I think my blog is a good place for learning, because I can link to videos that illustrate what I'm talking about.) But even video isn't that great a teaching tool if it only shows you a single hand, because in order for the information to be practical, you should be correlating a player's behavior over a series of hands, not just a single hand. I have included photographs when I think it aids in illustrating a specific facial expression or body language. But you should keep in mind that photographs are generally poor tools for teaching tells.

# Albuquerque, New Mexico

## February 2005

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I'm in a \$5-10 no-limit Hold'em game. There are eight players at the table. A loose, not-very-good regular named Tony is under-the-gun and raises to \$40. I'm two to the right of the button and I look down at:



Both Tony and I have around \$2,400. I take a couple seconds, studying the people behind me out of the corner of my eye. I know them both pretty well.

The player to my immediate left has chips out as if to call. This is a defensive move that probably means he would like to call the \$40, but that he does not plan on raising. If he was actually strong enough to raise, he wouldn't give any indication of wanting to call because he'd want his raise to be a surprise. The player on the button is holding his cards in one hand, slightly off the table, in a pose that I know from experience means he's going to muck.

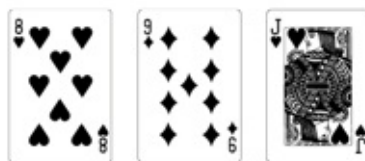
Facing a raise from a loose player like Tony, I'd probably re-raise with TT about half the time. Knowing the guys behind me are folding makes me feel better about raising in this spot.

I raise to \$120. Everyone mucks over to Tony, who calls the raise after a few seconds.

I've played with Tony a lot; he's a very loose-aggressive player, and he usually does all right against most of the ABC-strategy regulars and tourists. He's probably a slight winner in the game. He's a decent hand reader and smart enough to make good folds when he realizes he's beat, and he gets good value on his actual hands. But he's much too aggressive when he shouldn't be. He's a wealthy guy and not afraid of making big bluffs.

And I've played with him enough to understand a good amount of his body language and speech patterns. He's a loud, animated guy, and underestimates how much attention people are paying to him. His behavior can vary a good deal between the times he's got a weak hand and when he's got a strong hand.

The flop comes:



After a couple of seconds, he checks to me. I wait a couple of seconds and bet \$180. He calls

immediately. His immediate call makes me feel pretty confident he didn't flop a set, a straight, or two-pair. It's also unlikely he has an overpair, or even a strong Jack. With all of those hands, he would be vulnerable on such a draw-heavy board and would have taken at least a little time to consider a raise.

An immediate call in such a spot, for many people, is usually a drawing hand that is worth an obvious call. In this case, he could either have a straight draw or a flush draw. The straight draw could be something like 9T, TJ, or even QK. There's a lot of flush draws, and there's also quite a few hands like 67 of hearts or KQ of hearts that would give him the straight and the flush draw. In this spot, I'm leaning toward something like 9T because I think Tony would often be aggressive with the flush draw or at least he would think about a raise for a little while.

The turn makes:



Tony stares at me for a few seconds, and then bets \$400 into the \$600 pot. When he bets, he does this thing that a lot of players do when they're betting with a vulnerable hand: he puts out his chips into the pot for the bet, and then holds a stack of chips a few inches behind the betting line, almost as if to subtly imply he's ready to call if I were to raise him. I wait a few seconds. He stays completely quiet. When he's got a big hand, he often will talk to his opponent. It doesn't mean that when he's quiet he's always bluffing, but it makes it more likely. There's a possibility he has the Jack, but I think it's unlikely. Both his fundamental play and his tells lead me to believe it's very likely I'm ahead. I call.

A King comes on the river:



This is a very bad card if he was semi-bluffing any draw with a King in it. After a few seconds of staring at the board, Tony bets out \$900.

I weigh the possibilities. My real problem is that, from his perspective, my hand is fairly face-up as a one-pair hand. My hand range is basically TT, QQ, or AA, and not too much else. He would feel comfortable betting two-pair here, and maybe even just a rivered pair of Kings.

Logically, there are very few hands he could have in his range at this point. But when somebody puts a lot of money in the pot, it's going to be a weirdly-played big hand a good amount of the time. I start wondering if I've read him wrong and maybe he could have played a set or a straight like this. Or maybe he had KJ and hit two-pair on the river.

Throughout all of this, Tony is completely quiet. Like I said, this doesn't always mean he's bluffing, but it does make it more likely. He's also not looking towards me at all, except for an occasional fleeting glance. This is a more reliable indicator that he's bluffing because, when he has a big hand,

he's more willing to give an opponent a little more direct eye contact.

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As I'm thinking, Tony is riffling his chips with one hand. Trying to get a read, I stack up enough chips for a call, as if I'm ready to push them in, and I see his chip riffling slow down to about half-speed. This is also a common tell for a lot of people. Many people respond to the anxiety of an impending call by "freezing in the headlights" and slowing down their breathing or hand movements.

All of these things are indicators that he's bluffing, and I feel better about the call. I put in the money and he mucks his hand. I don't have to, but I show the Tens. Tony gets very angry. "That's the worst call I've seen this week, sir."

"Can't believe it was good," I say sheepishly, reinforcing my image to the rest of the table as a loose and stubborn player who doesn't think too much.

# POKER TELL THEORY

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## *The importance of tells in poker*

When I play poker, I watch my opponents carefully. I watch how they act when they have weak hands, how they act when they have strong hands, how they talk, how they sit, where they look, how they physically place their bets, and many other tendencies. Over the years I've learned to read average poker players very well. It hasn't been something that's come easy. It has taken dedicated study.

Some poker tells result from ignorance or mental laziness. Most poker players don't know that they might be being observed very carefully, and so they give away a lot about their intentions. They might stare at their hole cards when they have a weak hand. They might show an obvious intent to fold, or call, or bet. They might call quickly when they're weak, or bet quickly when they have a big hand, or have other noticeable bet-timing tells. These kinds of tells aren't related to extremes of emotions, but are just a result of the player not making an effort to "balance" their behavioral patterns.

Other poker tells result from emotional states, like anxiety, excitement, and relaxation. Many players tend to avert their eyes downward when they bluff (as liars are prone to do). Many players become very still and silent after bluffing, due to anxiety. Many players have a tendency to make more eye contact when betting with a strong hand, due to being more relaxed.

Unless you are a natural reader of people, learning to read poker tells is like learning another language. Learning to read poker tells means learning where to look for tells on a player's body, and when you should look for them. It means having an internal catalog of human gestures, expressions, and verbal statements, and knowing how to correlate that information with the behaviors of a specific player.

You should think of poker tells as being like any other observation you might make about an opponent. Just as you give weight to how reliable a player's betting patterns are, you can give weight to how reliable a player's tells are. If you are very uncertain about the reliability of a tell, you wouldn't assign much weight to that information. But if you have observed a player for a while and are confident about his behavioral patterns, his tells will impact your decisions.

Tells should seldom be your sole reason for doing something. The large majority of the time you should just be playing your best fundamental poker strategy, just as you would play online, in the absence of live tells. Some games will be tough, and you will only infrequently spot a tell that influences your decision. Some games will have several players who have a lot of tells, and your play will be drastically changed.

But you should never fall in love with tells; always remember that tells should influence your play only when you have solid reasons to trust their reliability.

While tell-reading is only a small part of playing great live poker, it's a powerful weapon to have in your arsenal. In my opinion, making good reads can add between 10% and 30% to a good player's win-rate. Also, if you're playing against experienced players and you haven't worked on eliminating your own tells, this will drastically reduce your win-rate. If you're playing live for significant stakes, and you aren't very good at reading tells or at hiding your own tells, you won't be making anywhere

near your maximum profit potential.

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### ***Everything means something***

I have a belief that some people might find extreme. I believe that *everything* a poker player does at the poker table means something. Every movement, every spoken word, every little twitch: it all means something. I think that it's theoretically possible, with infinite knowledge, to interpret every action at a poker table to discover exactly what a player is holding at any given time.

And I mean this fully. I believe you could theoretically differentiate between very similar hands; for instance, whether a pre-flop raiser in Hold'em was holding a pair of twos or a pair of threes. Assuming infinite knowledge of all information about the physical attributes of a player (heart rate, muscle tension, moisture of skin, tone of voice, etc.), and assuming infinite knowledge of that player's hand history—then theoretically there would be enough evidence to determine what a player is holding at any given time.

This is all only theoretical. Obviously, infinite knowledge is nowhere near possible in an actual poker game. You will never be able to observe *all* of the information available, let alone remember it. Our powers of observation are very limited. But we should strive to absorb as much *important* information as we can.

### ***The science of physical tells***

Dr. Paul Ekman is a scientist who has had a long career studying the meaning behind human facial expressions. His books are well-respected classics in the field, and he consults for industries as diverse as criminal investigation work and 3D character facial animations. (I recommend all of Ekman's books. Even if most of the information doesn't directly apply to poker, it will improve your understanding of human behavior.)

He and Dr. Maureen O'Sullivan conducted a survey of people that took place over many years. This survey was dedicated to finding what they termed "truth wizards", participants who were exceptionally gifted at spotting deception in the mannerisms and speech patterns of other people. After testing 20,000 people, Ekman and O'Sullivan had identified only fifty people as truth wizards—that's 0.25%, or one-quarter of one percent of the population.

The average person could do no better than 50%, which is no better than random. The truth wizards could identify deception with an accuracy of 80% or higher in the challenges the experimenters gave them. The wizards came from a wide range of backgrounds; most worked in jobs not related at all to identifying deception (although Secret Service agents did show the most aptitude.)

Dr. O'Sullivan said the wizards "are extraordinarily attuned to detecting the nuances of facial expressions, body language, and ways of talking and thinking."

She also said, "Some of them use the demeanor and vocal clues...but others base their judgments on behaviors and word usage that no researcher has previously identified."

If these studies are accurate, it means there are some people who are naturally skilled at reading other people. I believe such people exist; luckily for most poker players, there are very few of them around. Stu Ungar was a player who I think fell into this rare category.

Also, for the record, I don't believe I am one of these naturally-skilled people. But I do believe, as

Ekman does, that such information can be studied, acquired, and taught.

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**Side Note:** Dr. Paul Ekman

One of Paul Ekman's discoveries (also credited simultaneously to other scientists doing similar work) was that the major facial expressions—sadness, fear, surprise, happiness—were universal, across continents and cultures. Even though Charles Darwin, in his 1872 book “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals”, had already stated that he believed the major emotional expressions were universal, the idea had never been accepted in the mainstream. Most people had been operating under the assumption that facial expressions were culturally learned. The fact that the major facial expressions, and the underlying physiology, are universal is great news for students of body language and poker tells. The same basic tells will apply across different races and cultures.

**Side Note:** Stu Ungar

Stu Ungar was an expert of both gin rummy and poker. He was so good at gin rummy, and made so much money at it, that virtually no one would play him. Then he turned to poker and proceeded to dominate that game, too. In his short time playing competitive poker (he had serious drug problems for a large part of his career), he won three World Series of Poker championships.

While he was said to have a photographic memory and a natural mathematical understanding of cards, the skill that seemed to set him apart at poker was his ability to read people very, very well. Many other professional card players testified to his seemingly clairvoyant way of knowing what other players had. It's my opinion that Ungar was one of the very few super-gifted readers of people to focus all of their skills on card games.

### ***Achieving excellence***

If you want to become a great reader of poker tells, it's necessary to start with the belief that it's possible to become a great reader of poker tells. If you're someone who thinks that tells are of no real importance, then it's almost impossible that you'll ever be a great reader of poker tells, simply because your mind isn't going to be open to the many ways that you might improve.

I've been playing and studying poker seriously for eight years now, and I'm constantly amazed at how many factors can influence even the simplest poker decisions. I think the main weakness of most players is in thinking that they have already accumulated most of the knowledge needed to become a great player. This mindset leads to a know-it-all mentality and an inability to absorb new kinds of information that might take their game to a higher level.

When it comes to poker tells, many players, even many experienced ones, tend to downplay the importance of tell-reading ability. This may be because they have become winners without relying on poker tells, and they think tell-reading is a soft skill that either doesn't contribute to a win-rate at all or else contributes very slightly. (Go to Appendix, [“Common Criticisms of Using Poker Tells”](#) to read some criticisms of tells along with my rebuttals.)

Many players also underestimate how much information they're giving away with their own verbal statements and body language. Because they can't read tells or don't think tells are important, they don't bother to work on eliminating their own tells.

If you want to become the best poker player you can be, it's good to acknowledge the possibility that you may be at the beginning stages of your education. Starting with the belief that there is greatness possible in reading people opens your mind to the almost infinite amount of information that is present in a live game.

## ***The importance of correlation***

The most important concept when studying poker tells is correlation. *Correlation* is the act of establishing a relationship between two things. Applied to poker, correlation refers to matching a player's tells with specific situations. Once you've correlated a tell with a specific situation, this enables you to draw conclusions when you see that same tell in the same situation in the future.

Observing how your opponents behave in certain kinds of situations (for instance, when making a pure bluff on the river, or when value-betting with a strong hand) allows you to correlate their behavior with their hand strength. The more times you notice a connection between a player's behavior in a specific situation and his hand strength, the stronger the correlation is, and the more weight you can give to that information.

You should always keep in mind that tells are *tendencies*. By which I mean, they're something a specific player is more prone to do than not do. Tells are not something a player performs every single time (although I've seen tells that are probably 99% reliable for a player). Just as you'd gather information about an opponent's play (for example, what percentage of the time he raises pre-flop), you can gather information on the reliability of his tells (for example, the percentage of the time a player's eyes glance towards his lap as he's in the act of bluffing).

Some tells will be statistically insignificant, meaning there is no correlation between hand strength and behavior. Some tells will be *very* significant, meaning that they will have a very good chance of having a specific meaning. Those are the most useful tells and the ones we want to find.

But even a tell that is only slightly reliable can be useful in situations that we think are break-even spots from a fundamental strategy standpoint. (For instance, if we think it's even-money whether to call a river bet or fold to that bet, then a tell that is only correct 60% of the time will still be very useful in the long run.) Generally, though, if you can't fairly easily spot tells that seem likely to be statistically significant, you should move on and either study a different player or study another behavior of the same player.

Most of the common tells I will describe in this book are tendencies of a large percentage of the poker-playing population. But of course not everyone will have the same tells. Some players will exhibit tells that very few other people exhibit. (For example, I've played with a few people who slump in their seat and look dejected after bluffing, but this is the opposite of most players' behavior.) Some players will have eliminated most of the commonly-seen tells, but might have quirks of their own that are highly reliable. Some experienced players will have virtually eliminated their tells through hard work and experience.

So while you should learn the common poker tells, you should always keep in mind the importance of correlation. As a general rule, you should almost never act on potential tells you've spotted unless you have already correlated them with a player's past behavior. Only when you're very comfortable in your reading ability should you stray from this advice.

## ***A system for interpreting tells***

In most poker tell books, tells have been discussed without much of an organizational framework. They have been presented either as long lists or in categories that can seem a bit arbitrary. I believe my method of thinking about tells will improve your ability to understand and remember tells.



There are no tells that mean the same thing regardless of situation. Everything is situational. You can't say something like, "When this poker player stares at me, he's got a weak hand"—it doesn't work like that. You might say something like, "when this player stares at me when it's my turn to act he's got a weak hand", or "when this player slouches in his chair after he bets, he's got a strong hand" because those are specific situations. The biggest mistake I've seen other poker tell books make is not emphasizing the importance of the situation.

I've divided tells into three primary categories, depending on when during a hand a player exhibits them.

### **The three primary situational categories are:**

- *Waiting-for-Action Tells*
- *During-Action Tells*
- *Post-Bet Tells*

Waiting-for-action tells are tells that players exhibit while they are waiting for an opponent to act. Waiting-for-action tells can reveal either a player who wants you to bet or who doesn't want you to bet.

During-action tells are tells that players exhibit while it is their turn to act. These include such tells as how long it takes them to bet or check, or the physical manner in which they bet.

Post-bet tells are tells that players exhibit after making a bet. Post-bet tells can reveal either a player who wants a call or who doesn't want a call.

Now I'll explain these categories a little more with some examples of hands.

### ***Waiting-for-action tells***

Let's say you're heads up with a player and it's your turn to act. Your opponent's *waiting-for-action tells* are the tells he might exhibit while it's your turn and he's waiting for you to act. This could be either when you are first to act or when your opponent was first to act and he has checked to you.

### **Some examples of waiting-for-action tells are:**

- *An opponent staring at you when it's your turn to act*
- *An opponent who avoids looking at you when it's your turn to act*
- *An opponent holding out chips as if he's going to call if you bet*

### ***During-action tells***

Let's say you have checked to your opponent. Your opponent's *during-action tells* are the tells that he exhibits while it is his turn to act, as he checks, bets, or raises. These can be bet-timing tells (how long it takes to make a bet or to check) or behaviors associated with the physical act of betting.

### **Some examples of during-action tells are:**

- *An opponent waiting a long time to bet*

- An opponent saying “I bet” in a confident voice

- An opponent throwing chips forcefully into the pot

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### ***Post-bet tells***

Let’s say your opponent has now bet. Your opponent’s *post-bet tells* refer to any tells he exhibits after he bets.

#### **Some examples of post-bet tells are:**

- An opponent smiling slightly after betting

- An opponent avoiding eye contact after betting

- An opponent’s eyes getting slightly wider after betting

### ***The importance of categories***

The situational categories I’ve described are intellectual constructs; they are not completely perfect and can overlap slightly. But they are very useful for organizing your thoughts and observations about tells.

Without a framework for thinking about tells, you can easily be overwhelmed by the immense amount of information present at the poker table. One confusing fact is that some common tells can appear exactly the same, but can be opposite in meaning. For instance, one common tell that indicates waiting-for-action *weakness* is for a player to stare at you while it is your turn to act. Another common tell for post-bet *strength* looks exactly the same; after a player bets, he will stare at you.

Again: these two behaviors look the same but have opposite meanings. If you didn’t know to distinguish between waiting-for-action tells and post-bet tells you might think something like: “Oh, in an earlier hand, I saw him staring at me before I bet and he was weak. Now he’s gone all-in and he’s staring at me in the same way. He must be weak again!” Then you’d call his bet and lose and you might think: “This poker tell stuff is for the birds.”

This kind of basic misunderstanding is something I think happens often with people just starting out learning tells. I think it also accounts for a lot of players’ mistrust of using tells.

Make no mistake about it; you have to work at noticing and interpreting tells. Unless you’re playing with very weak competition, it doesn’t come easy. You’re basically learning how to see in a new way—to take a confusing mass of information and turn it into something usable. Having a good mental framework for observing tells will help you take the flood of sensations at the poker table and form it into coherent observations.

### ***Limitations of hand strength categories***

Along with the situational categories, tells must be categorized by hand-strength. The two basic hand strength categories are *Strong* and *Weak*.

This is obviously a simplification. An opponent can have hands that are not clearly strong or weak. For example, they can have a decent hand that is vulnerable or a draw that’s strong.

Even when poker tells are at their most reliable, they only tell us how a player *feels* about his hand or

what he intends to do. They can't directly tell us the strength of the player's hand. We have to infer, based on the situation and based on the type of player we're playing with, what these tells mean.

For instance, some players who flop a good draw in Hold'em (for example, overcards and a flush draw) might give tells associated with having a good hand. They might bet with confidence on the flop. When you're facing a pre-flop raiser and there are two diamonds on a Ten-high board, you have to take into account the fact that this guy could be betting confidently with a hand like AK of diamonds.

But that's a problem usually only on the flop because the flop is, for the most part, the only place where a draw is going to be stronger than a made hand. When that same player who flopped a strong draw with AK of diamonds gets to the turn and doesn't make his hand, his odds of hitting a hand have been almost cut in half. On the turn, with a slimmer chance of winning, he will be more likely to exhibit tells associated with a weak hand. If he gets to the river and still hasn't made a hand and is now bluffing, he's going to be even more likely to exhibit weak-hand tells.

Hand strength is usually relatively undefined on the flop. This is because of the possibility of draws. Additionally, in no-limit games, flop bets are smaller and less likely to produce emotion-based tells. These issues also often apply to the turn. This is why I tend to just play with my best fundamental strategy on the flop and turn, regardless of reads.

The river is a much different story, because there are no draws possible. So if you get a reliable read of strength or weakness, it will be more likely to mean something. In most cases a typical player, when he reaches the river, will usually have his own internal answer as to whether he wants action or doesn't want action.

Pre-flop, in a no-limit game, can be similar to the river, because there are no meaningful draws possible. (You could call AK, AQ, etc. "drawing hands", but in this instance I would not consider the "meaningful draws".) Pre-flop is not nearly as reliable as the river, but with some players you can notice differences in their pre-flop behavior. For example, many players will feel ambivalent with most of their hands, but they will show signs of anxiety when they push all-in with junk, or show signs of relaxation when they push all-in with a high pair.

The reasons in the previous three paragraphs are why I tend to rely on emotion-based tells mostly for big river bets, and occasionally for big pre-flop bets.

Breaking tells into 'strong' and 'weak' categories is a simplification, but it is a necessary simplification. If you have a reliable read on someone, it will give you an answer to the question, "Does he want me to play or does he want me to fold?" In most situations, against most players, that will be very valuable information.

### ***Conscious and unconscious behavior***

I consider Mike Caro's book on tells to be a classic and I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone. However, I disagree with the emphasis he placed on whether a tell was from an "actor" or from a "non-actor".

In his book, Caro split his tells up into two primary sections: *Tells from Actors* and *Tells from Non-Actors*. He said players who act either weak or strong will usually be the opposite of what they are representing. This is a fundamentally true observation but, in my opinion, this idea is only really of much use if you're playing with very bad players. Most players in mid- to high-stakes games are not

actors—their most common tells don't come from them trying to put on an act; their tells come from them accidentally exposing their level of anxiety or relaxation.

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The main problem with focusing on whether a tell is “acting” or “not acting” is that many tells don't easily fit into one or the other category. For example, [many players, when they have a strong hand, will avoid looking at the person whose turn it is to act, and avoid looking at the action in general.](#) What are they doing this? If it's a beginning player, he might be actively trying to trick you into thinking he isn't interested in the action. His actions may be exaggerated. He may actively try to look bored. He may stare off at the television. But you will see decent players perform this tell sometimes, and they are not trying to act. They are reacting to a natural, subconscious instinct to look unassuming. Their tells will not be exaggerated, but will be subtle.

[Another example would be players with strong hands who slump in their chair very slightly, making their body smaller.](#) You can see experienced players exhibit this tell. It's a natural animal instinct to become less threatening when you don't want to scare your prey—hence the ducking down and becoming smaller. But, again, on the surface it might seem like a conscious act designed to deceive.

There are many human behaviors like these that blur the line between conscious and unconscious. This makes thinking about acting vs. non-acting an impractical way to think about tells. It's especially impractical because it's usually only with the most beginner-level players that these tells will be consciously over-acted and exaggerated. If you're playing with somewhat-experienced competition, you should train yourself to be looking for more subtle tells than the ones exhibited by beginners.

### ***Tell factors***

There are factors that will affect how tells are displayed and how much meaning you should assign to them. Here's a rundown of some of the major factors:

**No-limit games:** No-limit games produce more stressful situations than limit games do. The most useful tells at no-limit will be related to anxiety and the release of anxiety (relaxation). The most significant tells will be more likely to be observed when big bets are made. On the other hand, no-limit players will be more likely to be harder to read than limit players at comparable stakes. You won't see as many tells as you see in a limit game, but the reliable tells you do see will be much more profitable.

**Limit games:** There are not many emotion-based tells in limit, because the bets are much smaller. Tells in a limit game will mostly come from lazy players who give away their honest intentions or “tricky” players who give away information with simple attempts at deception. Many limit players, even some decent ones, don't worry about concealing their own tells because the cost of leaked information isn't very high and because there aren't many observant players in most games. One important point about limit: the pot is usually offering a very good price, so you should hardly ever be making a fold based on a read, unless that read is very reliable.

**Pot size:** Typically, the larger the pot is, the more emotional-type tells there will be. This means you shouldn't waste a lot of mental energy trying to study how players act in small pots. It's still possible to see some of the more passive, lazy tells, but the most valuable information will come when you go to study how people act when they're in the more stressful situations.

**Player skill:** Tells are usually the easiest to spot and use when they come from mediocre players. Good players can still have tells, but they won't be as easy to spot. Good players are also capable of

manipulating your perception of them and giving false tells (although this is pretty rare.) Your time will generally be better spent focusing on the patterns of your worst opponents. (One thing to note: if a player is completely brand-new to the game, to where they barely know how to play, it will be very hard to get accurate reads on them. Beginning players will not know the relative strength of their own hands, so interpreting their own estimation of their hand strength will not give you much information. An opponent has to be at a certain base level of competency in order for it to be possible for them to be reliably read.)

**Emotion:** A change in a player's emotions can change his natural tendencies. For example, a player who normally places his chips in the pot consistently may go on tilt and start throwing his chips forcefully into the pot in certain situations, or if he's up against a player he dislikes. Some players will become easier to read; some players will become very unpredictable and become harder to read.

**The round of betting:** As discussed earlier, the more well-defined a player's hand strength is in a certain situation (like when a player bets big on the river, or pushes all-in pre-flop) the more likely the chance of getting a reliable read. The more chances of draws there are, like on the flop and turn, the more a person with a strong draw, or a vulnerable made hand, will have skewed ideas about their hand strength, and the less likely it is you will get a reliable read.

## II. TELLS

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### *General Poker Psychology*

Reading poker tells is primarily about sensing fear and the absence of fear (otherwise known as relaxation). Most discomfort at a poker table is a form of fear. Everything from the sheer terror of a degenerate gambler who's bluffing with his case money, to the small discomfort a decent player might feel when he continuation-bets a flop he hasn't connected with. Most of the tells I will describe in the following chapters are just variations on the theme of sensing an opponent's amount of anxiety or relaxation in specific situations.

When a player is waiting for you to bet, you are looking for clues to help you determine if he is fearful of you betting or not fearful of you betting. After someone has bet, you are trying to determine if he is fearful of being called or not fearful of being called. If you can figure out how fearful a player is, then you have probably answered the question, "What does this player want me to do in this situation?"

So what does fear look like at the poker table? Well, it can look very different, depending on the situation. I'll explain, using the two main categories I introduced in the last chapter: *waiting-for-action* and *post-bet*.

#### *Post-bet fear*

The most potentially fear-inducing situation for poker players is making a pure bluff (meaning a bluff that has a zero or nearly-zero chance of winning if called). The money being bluffed is at stake, as is the entire pot. Adding to the tension is the fact that the bluffer's opponent has an opportunity to study him after he bets. His opponent's decision might take some time, maybe even minutes, and the bluffer has to sit there and act cool under his opponent's scrutiny, all the while doing his best to not give his weakness away.

When a bluffer feels fear, it is the fear of someone afraid to be found out. The bluffer is, for all intents and purposes, lying. In some ways, he is feeling the same anxiety a guilty criminal might feel when being interrogated by the police. Now I'll contrast this fear with the fear of someone who doesn't wait for his opponent to bet.

#### *Waiting-for-action fear*

A player who has a weak hand, and who is waiting for his opponent to act, is more likely to feel a different type of fear. The player wants to win the pot, but his opponent might prevent him from winning the pot by betting into him. This player feels threatened by his opponent, and would prefer that his opponent didn't bet; this can be either because the waiting-for-action player wants to get a cheap showdown, or because he himself might decide to bluff. In any case, his opponent betting would be a bad thing for him.

This opponent is not under as much stress as a bluffer. And his fear is different; it is more *defensive* or *wary* than guilty. The waiting-for-action player with a weak hand can't be said to be lying, and it isn't his turn to act so he doesn't feel the pressure of being observed. He is merely threatened by his

opponent, and would like to prevent a bet.

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I described *post-bet fear* as being akin to the type of fear a criminal might feel when being interrogated by the police. You might describe *waiting-for-action fear* as the kind of defensive fear you might have when you're walking alone down a dark alley at night, and you see an intimidating person walking towards you.

The difference between these two types of situations is why I have separated the tells in this book into *waiting-for-action* and *post-bet*. (*During-action* is the third category, but it's not nearly as important as these two.) A player with a weak hand can exhibit very different behaviors, depending on if he's waiting for his opponent to act or if he's the one who has just bet. You should keep this in mind when reading this book and when observing tells.

## ***GENERAL INDICATORS OF RELAXATION AND ANXIETY***

Before getting to the specific tells, I'm going to describe some general indicators of anxiety and relaxation. If you know much about human behavior, a lot of the following information may seem like common sense to you. It's still helpful to review it, especially if you have never tried to apply this knowledge at the poker table.

These descriptions are general tendencies and are more likely to be true of people who have nothing to hide. Because it rewards deception, the game of poker will tend to twist these natural behaviors in various ways. But even considering this, the following descriptions will still often be very accurate indications of the emotional state, and thus the relative hand strength, of a player.

### ***Movement and stillness***

People who are anxious are more physically tense than people who are relaxed. They hold themselves tighter. They don't move as much. They are wary.

Think of a prey animal when a predator comes near. Think of a deer in a car's headlights. The natural instinct of a frightened animal is to freeze, to not attract attention. Humans are no different; the instinct is fairly hardwired.

Someone who is relaxed has a looser body. They move their arms loosely. Their gestures are flowing. They are mentally loose and this translates directly to their body movements.

### ***Silence and talking***

Anxious people are less likely to talk freely than are people who are relaxed. Just like a frightened animal goes silent in an attempt to hide from a potential threat, anxious people go silent.

People's throats literally contract when they are under stress. It becomes physically more difficult to speak. Nervous people may feel a dry, nervous swallowing reflex because their throats suddenly feel uncomfortable.

Anxious people who attempt to talk in a relaxed manner may find it difficult. They may talk a lot in an effort to appear relaxed, but their thoughts might not flow well or they may stop talking at weird moments. Anxious people avoid saying anything that could potentially offend an opponent or make an opponent suspicious.

What about relaxed people? They have the capability to talk freely, in a relaxed manner. They may feel relaxed enough to crack jokes. They may say aggressive or subtly hostile things to their opponents. They are more likely to be unconcerned with how other people view them or judge them.

### ***Real smiling and fake smiling***

People who are relaxed are more likely to exhibit genuine smiles. How can you tell a real smile from a fake smile? This is a whole complicated area of study in itself. But, in a nutshell, fake smiles don't involve the eyes nearly as much as real smiles do. Fake smiles also don't lift the corners of the mouth in the same way that real smiles do. Most people smiling to be polite, or smiling out of nervousness, have voluntary control over their mouth muscles, but they don't have control over the muscles that indicate a real smile. (Although some people are better at faking smiles than other people.)

### ***Eye exposure***

When someone is nervous, his or her eyes will tend to be open more. The whites of their eyes will be more exposed and visible.

People who are relaxed tend to have more closed eyelids; they show less eye-white.

### ***Eye contact***

This is the major area of difference between *waiting-for-action fear* and *post-bet fear*. This is due to the waiting-for-action fear being the fear of a threat, while the post-bet fear is more fear of exposure. The difference between these two types of behavior is the reason eye contact can be such an important tell. Here is how the two types of fear can manifest in a player's amount of eye contact:

**Waiting-for-action eye contact:** A person who is afraid of someone (like a poker player with a weak hand who is worried that his opponent will bet) will tend to watch the other person carefully. The anxious person will keep their full attention on the potential threat as much as they can (as long as watching the other person will not increase the threat, as in the case of staring at a threatening person on the street).

Keeping an eye on the potentially threatening person prevents the possibility of being attacked out-of-the-blue. It can also serve another purpose: it can let the potentially dangerous person know that they are being watched and that they should also be on their guard.

A relaxed person who doesn't feel threatened (like a player with a strong hand who is waiting for his opponent to act) won't feel as compelled to watch the other person. His gaze is more likely to be unconcerned and unstressed. If he has the upper hand in a competitive situation, he may actually avoid eye contact with a competitor because he doesn't want to intimidate the other person.

**Post-bet eye contact:** People who are afraid of being exposed (e.g., bluffers) will tend to make eye contact less than people who are relaxed. Making eye contact may be uncomfortable for them because they are afraid their fear will be sensed by others and their secret will be discovered. They would prefer to not look at the people who study them.

Relaxed people (like players with strong hands) are more capable of looking at the people around them with a loose, spontaneous gaze. Their thoughts aren't on how they're perceived or who they're



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