

Listening Skills



LISTENING SKILLS

Listening skills are a vital part of the oral communication process. As an active listener, you learn to *hear* what people are really saying. Good listening requires energy — we hear the speaker, select information, interpret information, and respond in just a few seconds.

Working at being a good listener is just as important as making your ideas understandable to others. Most of us think of listening as a passive activity where we take in information sent by others. But good listeners are good at concentrating on the communication process (their own as well as that of other persons). Basically, **good listeners are good concentrators**. We need to teach ourselves how to concentrate more effectively, so we can be better listeners.

Oral communication is a two-way process involving a sender (the speaker) and a receiver (the listener). Unless the message sent is received, there is no communication. As an active listener, you help the communication process by letting the sender know if his or her message is getting across to you.

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Focus

Listening plays a vital role in our personal lives and our work lives. At work, listening is important to our performance and the quality of our efforts. If we fail to hear instructions correctly, we can cause loss of time and money. If we fail to listen to clients' complaints, our organization can lose business. Effective listening is hearing what people are really saying. Like any other skill, listening needs to be practiced if it is to be mastered. This booklet will help to raise awareness about those things upon which we should concentrate most to become better listeners.

Some experts say that we retain only about 20% of what we hear. So listening becomes a real challenge if we are trying to relate to others effectively or are trying to do our job well. We know it's a challenge because **the average person thinks four times faster than they talk or hear** another person talking. This gives the average person 45 seconds out of every minute for their mind to drift off and think about anything other than what the other person is saying.

Listening requires being attentive, showing understanding, acknowledging the other person, being sensitive, and concentrating. It means having an open and positive attitude. **Listening effectively means really wanting to listen before responding to what is being said.**

We often don't consciously pay full attention to others who are communicating with us. We take our cues from the setting or the circumstances, a person's role, a person's relationship to us, personality style, or their knowledge on an issue. **Hence, in familiar situations, we hear what we expect to hear.**

Listening as an active process involves:

- being motivated and wanting to listen
- paying attention, being aware and interested in understanding
- sharing responsibility for communication with the speaker
- using learned skills (how to listen, etc.)

Listening has its rewards: getting more accurate information, gaining a better understanding of others, facilitating a mutual exchange of information, better problem-solving, and better decision-making. It is also often the key to enhancing relationships.

There are risks to listening well. We make ourselves more vulnerable to the concerns of others; we see ourselves as others see us; we learn new things that change our views; and sometimes our listening is not appreciated.



1

Focus

Only information that we pay attention to can enter into our thinking and lead to understanding. We do not always pay attention. Instead, we take our cues from personalities, a person's role, a person's relationship to us, knowledge of an issue, the specific occasion, or the circumstance. Our motives and attitudes can also influence our attention.

As a listener, you need to be consciously ready to listen and concentrate in order to share in the communication process. Generally, people choose to listen to messages that are important, that are interesting, that are communicated by a person they like or respect or enjoy listening to, or that are about matters they have listened to in the past.

Paying careful attention to the speaker will show that you have a positive attitude about listening. Set aside your ego to focus on the speaker rather than on yourself. Do not fake attention. Daydreaming is another form of private escape and a barrier to listening. Indicate that you want to be involved in the communication process by focusing on the speaker's message.

Hence, good listening is fundamentally about focusing on the speaker and giving them your full attention. Try to eliminate or tune out any surrounding distractions so that you can concentrate on what the speaker is saying. Noisy equipment, other conversations, phones ringing, or interruptions will make it difficult for you to follow the speaker's message. To attend to another person, you also need to be comfortable and at ease within yourself. If you are tense or experiencing physical discomfort, it will show and you will likely deter the speaker from talking clearly. If you cannot pay careful attention to the speaker, admit that this is a problem and schedule another time to get together. Resolve to give the speaker your undivided attention.

We show another person that they have our attention when we look at them. You should therefore establish and maintain eye contact with the speaker most of the time. By looking at the other person, you will show genuine interest in his or her views and feelings. Your gaze should include natural movements because unbroken eye contact or a fixed stare can be embarrassing or distracting.

In order to build your focus and concentration skills, consider: (1) why you need to listen, (2) the purpose of what is being said, (3) what listening carefully will do for you, and (4) what the speaker is saying that you can use.



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Follow

A short verbal comment is another way of properly attending to and opening communication with others. Examples of various opening questions include:

- “What’s on your mind?”
- “Do you want to tell me about it?”
- “What do you think about all this?”
- “How are you feeling?”
- “What’s happened since our last meeting?”

People appreciate it when you make the time to hear them. In a work situation in particular, employees at any level feel good when their supervisor has shown them consideration and has indicated that they have something to say.

The best way to encourage the other person to talk and express their feelings is by talking as little as possible yourself. Encourage the speaker to make their point by using silence to prompt them to continue.

You can encourage the other person to “open up” by using short responses that indicate that they should continue the story or develop the point they are making. Practice using various kinds of minimal responses such as “go on”, “I see”, “yeah”, “mm-hmm” that encourage others to clarify their feelings, views and opinions.

You can also use questions frequently to encourage the speaker to continue and to be more specific. Allow the speaker to paint a full picture by using open questions. Open questions usually begin with “what,” “how,” “why,” “could,” “would,” and can’t be answered in a few words. For example: “How do you feel about that?” “Can you tell me more about that?” “Give me three reasons.” Closed questions often begin with *do*, *is*, *are*, and can be answered with *yes* or *no*. For example, “Is that the best approach, in your opinion?”

An effective listener will show interest by not interrupting the speaker. If the other person is hesitating, use occasional responses such as “mmm...,” “and?” “so?” or non-verbal signals such as a nod to encourage them to go on.

Don’t forget, the speaker will know whether you are attending if your responses relate directly to what they have been saying. Observe the words or issues the speaker seems to be emphasizing. Concentrate on what is being said so that later in the course of the conversation, you can give an appropriate response.

