



Improving My Listening Skills

Does this sound like you?

- “You never hear what I say to you.”
- “It’s like what I say goes in one ear and out the other with you.”
- “I took notes in class, but somehow what I heard is not what ends up on paper.”

Listen Up

Many people think that there is nothing to listening; after all, we do it all the time. However, most of the listening we do is passive, like listening to music or watching TV. We aren’t actively engaged, so it really doesn’t matter if we understand the words to the song or follow the plot of the TV show. The average person generally speaks at a rate of 100 to 175 words per minute, but they can listen intelligently at 600 to 800 words per minute. Since only a part of our mind is paying attention, it is easy for our minds to drift—to think about other things while we listen to someone. The cure for this is active listening, which involves listening with a purpose.

Prepare with a positive, engaged attitude:

- **Focus your attention on the subject:** Stop all irrelevant activities beforehand to orient yourself to the speaker or the topic. This includes turning off the TV, cell phones, etc.
- **Review mentally what you already know about the subject:** Organize in advance relevant material in order to develop it further (previous lectures, newspaper articles, websites, prior real life experience, etc.).
- **Avoid distractions:** Seat yourself appropriately close to the speaker, and avoid distractions (a window, a talkative neighbor, noise, etc.).
- **Acknowledge any emotional state:** Suspend emotions until later, or passively participate unless you can control your emotions.
- **Set aside your prejudices, your opinions:** You are present to learn what the speaker has to say, not the other way around.

Actively listen:

- **Be other-directed; focus on the person communicating:** Follow and understand the speaker as if you were walking in their shoes. Listen with your ears, but also pay attention with your other senses.

If you're finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, try repeating their words mentally as they say it. This will reinforce their message and help you control mind drift.

- **Be involved:** Actively respond to questions and directions. Use your body position and attention to encourage the speaker. Maintain eye contact, lean slightly forward to show interest, and relax. Check that your posture communicates openness.
- **Restate or paraphrase:** Although we commonly respond with short verbal encouragement, like “Uh-huh” or “Right,” active listening involves responding by restating what you heard to show that you heard it correctly.

Follow-up activities

Try practicing listening skills in different settings, such as one-on-one or in a group. Below are some examples of the types of active listening likely to enhance your interactions with others.

Actions	One-to-one	In a group/audience
Give the speaker time and space:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To rest after talking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To regroup and debrief after talking
Express appreciation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For sharing, to build trust and encourage dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a manner appropriate for the occasion
Check if you have understood:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize and restate key points to affirm your understanding • Ask (nonthreatening) questions to build understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jot down notes • Briefly summarize and restate key points to affirm your understanding
If posing a question:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly express appreciation • Briefly summarize a preliminary point • Ask the relevant question 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefly summarize a preliminary point • Ask the relevant question or make a statement to clarify your understanding
If making a point:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly express appreciation • Briefly summarize a preliminary point • State your idea, interpretation, reflection • Invite a response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly express appreciation • Briefly restate the relevant idea as presented • State your idea, interpretation, reflection • Invite a response

Continued dialogue/development:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflect on your experience to demonstrate your interest (feedback)• Interpret after you feel you have grasped content• Apply what you have learned to a new situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get contact information for later reference• Invite friends/colleagues/etc. for discussion afterward• Write out a summary with questions for further review
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