

How to Listen



Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process.

Listening is key to all effective communication. Without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood. As a result, communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated.

If there is one communication skill you should aim to master, then listening is it.

Listening is so important that many top employers provide listening skills training for their employees. This is not surprising when you consider that good listening skills can lead to better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, and increased sharing of information that in turn can lead to more creative and innovative work.

Many successful leaders and entrepreneurs credit their success to effective listening skills. Richard Branson frequently quotes listening as one of the main factors behind the success of Virgin.

Effective listening is a skill that underpins all positive human relationships.

Spend some time thinking about and developing your listening skills – they are the building blocks of success.

Good listening skills also have benefits in our personal lives, including:

A greater number of friends and social networks, improved self-esteem and confidence, higher grades at school and in academic work, and even better health and general well-being.

Studies have shown that, whereas speaking raises blood pressure, attentive listening can bring it down.

Listening is Not the Same as Hearing!

Hearing refers to the sounds that enter your ears. It is a physical process that, provided you do not have any hearing problems, happens automatically.

Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort, both mental and sometimes physical as well.

Listening means paying attention not only to the story, but how it is told, the use of language and voice, and how the other person uses his or her body. In other words, it means being aware of both verbal and non-verbal messages. Your ability to listen effectively depends on the degree to which you perceive and understand these messages.

Listening is not a passive process. In fact, the listener can, and should, be at least as engaged in the process as the speaker. The phrase 'active listening' is used to describe this process of being fully involved.

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen

We Spend a lot of Time Listening

Adults spend an average of 70% of their time engaged in some sort of communication.

Of this, research shows that an average of 45% is spent listening compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. (Adler, R. et al. 2001). That is, by any standards, a lot of time listening. It is worthwhile, therefore, taking a bit of extra time to ensure that you listen effectively.

Based on the research of: Adler, R., Rosenfeld, L. and Proctor, R. (2001)

Interplay: the process of interpersonal communicating (8th edn), Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.

The Purpose of Listening

There is no doubt that effective listening is an extremely important life skill. Why is listening so important?

Listening serves a number of possible purposes, and the purpose of listening will depend on the situation and the nature of the communication.

To specifically focus on the messages being communicated, avoiding distractions and preconceptions.

To gain a full and accurate understanding into the speaker's point of view and ideas.

To critically assess what is being said. (See our page on Critical Thinking for more).

To observe the non-verbal signals accompanying what is being said to enhance understanding.

To show interest, concern and concentration.

To encourage the speaker to communicate fully, openly and honestly.

To develop a selflessness approach, putting the speaker first.

To arrive at a shared and agreed understanding and acceptance of both sides' views.

Often our main concern while listening is to formulate ways to respond. This is not a function of listening. We should try to focus fully on what is being said and how it's being said in order to more fully understand the speaker.

Effective listening requires concentration and the use of your other senses - not just hearing the words spoken.

Listening is not the same as hearing and in order to listen effectively you need to use more than just your ears.

Barriers to Effective Listening

To improve the process of effective listening, it can be helpful to turn the problem on its head and look at barriers to effective listening, or ineffective listening.

For example, one common problem is that instead of listening closely to what someone is saying, we often get distracted after a sentence or two and instead start to think about what we are going to say in reply or think about unrelated things. This means that we do not fully listen to the rest of the speaker's message.



This problem is attributed, in part, to the difference between average speech rate and average processing rate. Average speech rates are between 125 and 175 words a minute whereas we can process on average between 400 and 800 words a minute. It is a common habit for the listener to use the spare time while listening to daydream or think about other things, rather than focusing on what the speaker is saying.

Of course, the clarity of what the speaker is saying can also affect how well we listen. Generally, we find it easier to focus if the speaker is fluent in their speech, has a familiar accent, and speaks at an appropriate loudness for the situation. It is

more difficult, for example, to focus on somebody who is speaking very fast and very quietly, especially if they are conveying complex information.

We may also get distracted by the speaker's personal appearance or by what someone else is saying, which sounds more interesting.

These issues not only affect you, but you are likely to show your lack of attention in your body language.

Generally, we find it much harder to control our body language, and you are likely to show your distraction and/or lack of interest by lack of eye contact, or posture. The speaker will detect the problem, and probably stop talking at best. At worse, they may be very offended or upset.

Our page on [Barriers to Effective Listening](#) explains more about common listening problems, and our page [Listening Misconceptions](#) details some of the common myths and misconceptions about listening.

Finally, it is important not to jump to conclusions about what you see and hear. You should always seek clarification to ensure that your understanding is correct.

How well do you listen? Take the:

[Interpersonal Skills Self-Assessment](#)

[SkillsYouNeed.com](#)

More on listening, continue to:

[Active Listening | The 10 Principles of Listening](#)

[Types of Listening | Barriers to Effective Listening](#)

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Listening Lessons



Knowing how to listen is important for any effective communication. Whether in an interview, a meeting or during a one-on-one conversation you need to be able to focus on what the person wants to say and what they are asking from you. It involves several skills that can be learned.

Here are some listening lessons you should do NOW!

Lesson 1. How do I listen effectively?

- 1. Prepare** - Be aware of your own feelings and needs. Are you able to shut out distractions and focus on what this person is about to say?
- 2. Listen and Clarify** - Listen to the speaker's perspective, feelings and wants. If you don't feel as if you've clearly understood what they are saying ask for clarification or more information. Helpful phrases are "I'd just like to check that I've understood what you said correctly..." "Just let me run this past you..."
- 3. Acknowledge** - Communicate to the speaker that you've heard their point of view, for example: "I can hear that you are feeling very stressed at the moment." "You seem to be very worried about..."
- 4. Your posture** - Make sure your posture indicates interest in what the person is saying. This can be done by facing the person, at an appropriate distance. Having relaxed arms and legs rather than crossing or folding arms or legs "like a barrier" helps.
- 5. Appropriate body motion** - Move in a synchronized way with the speaker. A very rigid, still position or too much fidgeting is distracting and off-putting.
- 6. Eye contact** - Respect cultural difference. For Maori, Pacific Islanders and some other groups, direct eye contact may be considered offensive or aggressive. Be led by the speakers' comfort with eye contact. Effective eye contact usually consists of "bursts" of eye contact with movement to other parts of the person's face or hands and looking away.
- 7. Suitable environment** - Make sure the environment is welcoming – avoid physical barriers like desks in the way.

Lesson 2. How do I indicate I'm listening?

- 1. Use door openers** - These are non-coercive invitations to talk. Statements such as "Want to tell me about it?" "What seems to be bothering you?"
- 2. Use minimal encouragers** - These are usually not so much words with content as sounds or movements that show the speaker you are interested in what they are saying. For instance, "mmm.mm" "really" ... "right" ... "oh" ... "ok" and nodding your head.
- 3. Use open questions** - Open questions which require more than a "yes" or "no." Examples would be "how did you feel about that?" "What would you like to have had happen?" Remember to only ask one question at a time.
- 4. Use attentive silence** - By not jumping in as soon as the person stops talking you may give them the space, they need to think over what was said, to feel different emotions and sometimes to express new ideas.



- L** = Look interested - get interested
- I** = Involve yourself by responding
- S** = Stay on target
- T** = Test your understanding
- E** = Evaluate the message
- N** = Neutralise your feelings

Lesson 3. How do I know I've heard right?

- 1. Use paraphrasing as a reflective skill** - This means providing the person with a synopsis of what they were saying. It should contain the essence of what the speaker has been saying.

This is a very powerful way of showing someone that you've heard them – and most importantly – understood them.

- 2. Reflection back their feelings or emotions** - This is rather like being a mirror for someone. The idea is to go beyond words they use and pick up on their feelings. Look at body language, listen to their tone of voice, think of how you might feel in their position. Useful phrases include: "You seem pretty upset about..."; "it sounds like that shook you up quite a bit"; "I guess you're quite angry now."
- 3. Reflect meaning** - This is an attempt to make some logical links for the speaker – trying to help them connect thoughts, events and feelings. For instance, "You are upset because he had promised "x" and instead did "y."
- 4. Summarize** - At the end of a discussion, it is helpful to revisit the main issues discussed and add any outcomes to them. "It seems that there are some issues

which you have been worrying about and you've decided to talk to someone to someone about them," "so you are going to approach _____ about that and you also feel you need to go to _____ for help with that problem."

Let me know how you did with these lessons. I would like to know how you are doing. And if you need more help contact me;

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