

Listening Skills

Adapted from <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html>

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 – 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 many benefits: better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, increased sharing of information, which 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.

*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. – Rachel Naomi Remen*

Listening is Not the Same as Hearing

Hearing refers to the sounds that you hear, whereas listening requires more than that: it requires focus. 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.

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

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

We Spend Much Time Listening

Adults spend an average of 70% of their time engaged in some sort of communication, of this an average of 45% is spent listening, compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. [Based on R. Adler, L. Rosenfeld, and R. Proctor. *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communicating*. 8th ed., Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 2001.]

*Do not jump to conclusions about what you see and hear.
Always seek clarification to ensure that your understanding is correct.*

The 10 Principles of Listening

A good listener will listen not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid or only partially said.

Effective listening involves observing body language and noticing inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages. For example, if someone tells you that they are happy with their life but through gritted teeth or with tears filling their eyes, you should consider that the verbal and non-verbal messages are in conflict, they maybe don't mean what they say.

1: Stop Talking

"If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear." Mark Twain.

Don't talk, listen. When somebody else is talking listen to what they are saying, do not interrupt, talk over them or finish their sentences for them. Stop, just listen. When the other person has finished talking you may need to clarify to ensure you have received their message accurately.

2: Prepare Yourself to Listen

Relax. Focus on the speaker. Put other things out of mind. The human mind is easily distracted by other thoughts – what's for lunch, what time do I need to leave to catch my train, is it going to rain – try to put other thoughts out of mind and concentrate on the messages that are being communicated.

3: Put the Speaker at Ease

Help the speaker to feel free to speak.

Remember their needs and concerns. Nod or use other gestures or words to encourage them to continue.

Maintain eye contact but don't stare – show you are listening and understanding what is being said.

4: Remove Distractions

Focus on what is being said. Don't doodle, shuffle papers, look out the window, pick your fingernails or similar. Avoid unnecessary interruptions. These behaviors disrupt the listening process and send messages to the speaker that you are bored or distracted.

5: Empathize

Try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at issues from their perspective. Let go of preconceived ideas. By having an open mind we can more fully empathize with the speaker. If the speaker says something that you disagree with then wait and construct an argument to counter what is said but keep an open mind to the views and opinions of others.

6: Be Patient

A pause, even a long pause, does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished. Be patient and let the speaker continue in their own time, sometimes it takes time to formulate what to say and how to say it. Never interrupt or finish a sentence for someone.

7: Avoid Personal Prejudice

Try to be impartial. Don't become irritated and don't let the person's habits or mannerisms distract you from what the speaker is really saying. Everybody has a different way of speaking - some people are for example more nervous or shy than others, some have regional accents or make excessive arm movements, some people like to pace while talking - others like to sit still. Focus on what is being said and try to ignore styles of delivery.

8: Listen to the Tone

Volume and tone both add to what someone is saying. A good speaker will use both volume and tone to their advantage to keep an audience attentive; everybody will use pitch, tone and volume of voice in certain situations – let these help you to understand the emphasis of what is being said.

9: Listen for Ideas – Not Just Words

You need to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces. Maybe one of the most difficult aspects of listening is the ability to link together pieces of information to reveal the ideas of others. With proper concentration, letting go of distractions, and focus this becomes easier.

10: Wait and Watch for Non-Verbal Communication

Gestures, facial expressions, and eye-movements can all be important. We don't just listen with our ears but also with our eyes – watch and pick up the additional information being transmitted via non-verbal communication.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Adapted from <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/ineffective-listening.html>

It is common, when listening to someone else speak, to be formulating a reply while the other person is still talking. However, this means that we are not really listening to all that is being said.

Even good listeners are often guilty of critically evaluating what is being said before fully understanding the message that the speaker is trying to communicate. The result is that assumptions are made and conclusions reached about the speaker's meaning, but these might be inaccurate. This and other types of ineffective listening lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication.

Even if we are not formulating a response while listening, we may still be thinking of other things, albeit subconsciously. During a conversation, how often have thoughts such as "*What am I going to have for my dinner*", "*Will I have time to finish that report?*" or "*I hope I am not late picking the kids up*" crossed your mind? At such times, we are distracted and not giving our full attention to what is being said. In other words we are not actively listening to the speaker.

We can easily pick up bad habits when it comes to listening - this page examines some of the barriers and bad habits of listening - enabling you to address and correct them. Listening is a key interpersonal skill and a prerequisite to many other communication skills – by learning to listen more effectively you can improve the quality of your professional and personal life.

Common Barriers to Listening

There are many things that get in the way of listening and you should be aware of these barriers, many of which are bad habits, in order to become a more effective listener. Barriers and bad habits to effective listening can include:

- **Trying to listen to more than one conversation at a time**, this includes having the television or radio on while attempting to listen to somebody talk; being on the phone to one person and talking to another person in the same room and also being distracted by some dominant noise in the immediate environment.
- **You find the communicator attractive/unattractive** and you pay more attention to how you feel about the communicator and their physical appearance than to what they are saying. Perhaps you simply don't like the speaker - you may mentally argue with the speaker and be fast to criticize, either verbally or in your head.
- **You are not interested** in the topic/issue being discussed and become bored.
- **Not focusing** and being easily distracted, fiddling with your hair, fingers, a pen etc. or gazing out of the window or focusing on objects other than the speaker.
- **Feeling unwell or tired**, hungry, thirsty or needing to use the toilet.
- **Identifying rather than empathizing** – understanding what you are hearing but not putting yourself in the shoes of the speaker. As most of us have a lot of internal self-dialogue we spend a lot of time listening to our own thoughts and feelings - it can be difficult to switch the focus from 'I' or 'me' to 'them' or 'you'. Effective listening involves opening your mind to the views of others and attempting to feel empathetic.
- **Sympathizing rather than empathizing** – sympathy is not the same as empathy, you sympathize when you feel sorry for the experiences of another, to empathize is to put yourself in the position of the other person.
- **You are prejudiced or biased** by race, gender, age, religion, accent, and/or past experiences.
- **You have preconceived ideas or bias** – effective listening includes being open-minded to the ideas and opinions of others, this does not mean you have to agree but should listen and attempt to understand.
- **You make judgements**, thinking, for example that a person is not very bright or is under-qualified so there is no point listening to what they have to say.

- **Previous experiences** – we are all influenced by previous experiences in life. We respond to people based on personal appearances, how initial introductions or welcomes were received and/or previous interpersonal encounters. If we stereotype a person we become less objective and therefore less likely to listen effectively.
 - **Preoccupation** – when we have a lot on our minds we can fail to listen to what is being said as we're too busy concentrating on what we're thinking about. This is particularly true when we feel stressed or worried about issues.
 - **Having a Closed Mind** – we all have ideals and values that we believe to be correct and it can be difficult to listen to the views of others that contradict our own opinions. The key to effective listening and interpersonal skills more generally is the ability to have a truly open mind - to understand why others think about things differently to you and use this information to gain a better understanding of the speaker.
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Non-Verbal Signs of Ineffective Listening

Although with all non-verbal signals a certain amount of error has to be expected, generally signs of inattention while listening include:

- **Lack of eye contact with the speaker:** listeners who are engaged with the speaker tend to give eye contact. Lack of eye contact can, however, also be a sign of shyness.
 - **An inappropriate posture:** slouched, leaning back or 'swinging' on a chair, leaning forward onto a desk or table and/or a constantly shifting posture. People who are paying attention tend to lean slightly towards the speaker.
 - **Being distracted:** fidgeting, doodling, looking at a watch, yawning.
 - **Inappropriate expressions and lack of head nods:** often when a listener is engaged with a speaker they nod their head, this is usually an almost subconscious way of encouraging the speaker and showing attention. Lack of head nods can mean the opposite – listening is not happening. The same can be true of facial expressions, attentive listeners use smiles as feedback mechanisms and to show attention.
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Further Signs of Ineffective Listening

Other common traits of ineffective listening include:

- **Sudden Changes in Topic:** When the listener is distracted they may suddenly think about something else that is not related to the topic of the speaker and attempt to change the conversation to their new topic.
 - **Selective Listening:** This occurs when the listeners think they have heard the main points or have got the gist of what the speaker wants to say. They filter out what they perceive as being of key importance and then stop listening or become distracted.
 - **Daydreaming:** Daydreaming can occur when the listeners hear something that sets off a chain of unrelated thoughts in their head – they become distracted by their 'own world' and adopt a 'far-away' look.
 - **Advising:** Some people want to jump in early in a conversation and start to offer advice before they fully understand the problem or the concerns of the speaker.
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Ineffective Listening is Very Common

You can probably think of examples when you have listened ineffectively or not been listened to over the last 24 hours. You can probably recognize the frustration and irritation when you realize the person you are talking to is not listening to you. As listening is so fundamental to the communication processes, it is important to try to avoid ineffective listening.

CBI, Diocese of Orange – Year 3 – Experiences of Listening

Adapted from *Facilitating for Growth*, Chapter 4, “Communication Basics – Listening Skills”

1) Recall a group experience in which you were speaking, and felt truly listened to and understood.

What did others do to let you know that they were listening to you with understanding?
How did you feel?

Contrarily, what did others do to show that they were *not* listening and did *not* understand?
How did you feel?

2) Recall an experience when you were listening to someone else, and truly understanding.

What did others do to let you know that you were listening well and understanding?
How did you feel?

Contrarily, what did others do to show that you were *not* really listening or understanding?
How did you feel?