

Listening Skills

Effective listening is a critical communication life skill. Listening not only improves your chances of being a successful student, but also of building good relationships at home and in the workplace. As a student, your main goal is comprehension, and this involves listening actively. Active listening is a conscious activity, to hear and understand the idea behind the words.

Listening is about concentration.

There are number of different ways to improve your listening skills.

1. Before attending a lecture, **know the topic** under discussion; gather some background information so that you know what to expect. This will increase your level of interest and understanding. Find the reason for listening, why you are attending the lecture. Keep focused on the topic.
2. Concentrate on the topic. **Do not let your mind wander**. Think: What is in this for me? Sit where you can see the speaker. Avoid distractions, for instance looking out the window or being side-tracked by other students. Sit comfortably.
3. **Having a positive frame of mind** is what James (2010) refers to as being optimistic, believing you can understand what is being presented, and being open to new ideas. This increases your self-confidence. "Open minds are like parachutes; they only function when open" (Murphy, 1987, as cited in Pauk & Owens, 2011, p. 342). The wrong attitude will impact negatively on your ability to listen and make good notes. Turn your thoughts around so that the learning becomes a positive experience. This applies whether you think the subject matter boring or whether you disagree with the speaker. Pretending to listen is just as harmful.
4. **Be a non-judgmental listener**. Avoid emotional and biased reactions to emotive words or subjects. Reaction to words which "push your buttons" prompt emotional reactions and outbursts, known as "flames" (Pauk & Owens, 2011) and need to be rationalised in order for the lecture to be a positive and informative experience.
5. Being non-judgmental raises another issue: **Judge the content of the session rather than becoming distracted by the speaker**. Not everyone finds public speaking easy. You may know some brilliant people who have profound knowledge yet are poor speakers. The delivery does not detract from the value of the content so concentrate on the subject matter, not the speaker.
6. **Take notes**; this helps you to concentrate and remain focused. A good listener will try to anticipate the next point, connect known ideas and then write these down. Make notes on the

main points only, without trying to write down every word. Good notes are a useful record of the event. Better still is to paraphrase what is being said, as this not only tests your concentration but also your understanding.

7. Finally, **ask questions** of what you do not understand. Ask questions at appropriate times without unnecessarily disrupting the speaker. There is usually time for questions during a session, and again at the end. In the meantime, jot down any you may have. Asking questions is also a way of giving feedback and actively engaging with the speaker and fellow students. Ultimately it is the student's responsibility to make sure they understand the content of the lecture. If you are in doubt, **continue to make notes** during the lecture and ask questions later.

References

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