

Rapid Skill-Builder®

Listening



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 adept at concentrating on the communication process. 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 that was sent is actually 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.

▼ 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 organisation 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 we need to concentrate on 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 he/she talks, or hears** another person talking. This gives the average person 45 seconds out of every minute for the 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 complete 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 knowledge on an issue. **In familiar situations, we often 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. In addition, it is often the key to enhancing relationships.

There are also risks to listening well that we need to be aware of. 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.

Only information that we pay attention to can enter into our thinking and lead to understanding. The specific occasion or the circumstances, as well as our motives and attitudes can 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.

Good listening is fundamentally about focusing on the speaker and giving the person 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.

Paying careful attention to the speaker will show that you have a positive attitude about listening.

Here are some tips to help convey the message that you are paying attention.

- **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.**

We show others 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.



▼ Follow

A short verbal comment is one 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 that is worth listening to.

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 a point by using silence to prompt him or her to continue.

You can also encourage someone to “open up” by using short responses that indicate that the person should continue the story or develop the point he or she is 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. Examples of open questions are:

- **“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*. An example of a closed question is:

- **“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 him or her to go on.

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



▼ Filter

Most people prefer to be listened to by a person who is warm and attentive than someone who is cold and distant. Be sure to observe and identify the emotions or concerns (e.g., happy, angry, confused, sad, scared) and the strength of feeling (e.g., strong or weak) being shown by the speaker.

Find a few words that capture the essence of what the other person is feeling, for example: "*I sense that you are really annoyed*" or "*I sense that you feel sad*". Use these words as a response to check how accurately you are perceiving the other person.

Feedback from the speaker can confirm your perception ("Yes, *that's exactly how I feel*"), or can indicate that your perception needs to be modified ("*That's not quite right, I feel very angry and frustrated*").

Every good listener has a positive and accepting attitude to what is being said and shows that he or she is relating to what is being said. Sensitivity is shown by indicating an acceptance of the other person's standpoint, even if the listener does not agree with it.

Try to understand what the speaker has been saying at the level it has been expressed and show that you understand and accept the speaker's feelings and experience. That way, you will be able to encourage people to open up to you.

Remember: It is important to acknowledge the other person's thoughts and feelings by asking questions to show your interest. Give a reflective response to show that you understand how the speaker feels. By being open to the speaker's ideas, you become a source of support to the speaker rather than a source of anxiety. Talking candidly with others helps us get to know ourselves and helps others get to know us. We ultimately build rewarding relationships by communicating openly and completely with other people.

Active listening is about receiving information accurately. To do this, you need to set aside your own ego, keep your emotions under control, and focus on the speaker's message. Be careful to judge the message rather than the speaker. Listen for feelings as well as words, and consciously estimate the logic and rationality of the speaker's viewpoint.

Processing the information that is being communicated will help you to obtain a better sense of its meaning and improve your ability to remember. You should also give yourself time to work out a response that leads to a "win-win" plan where the outcome will be acceptable to everyone involved.



▼ Feel

In order to respond to the speaker's feelings, you need to have a good understanding of how the situation is being experienced by the speaker. Empathy is a way of responding to another person's feelings. Ask yourself: "If I were the speaker and I were doing and saying these things, how would I feel?" In other words, put yourself in the speaker's place and try to see what is being said through his or her eyes.

Empathy sometimes gets linked with sympathy but the two are different. **Sympathy means sharing in the feeling being experienced by another person and showing compassion.** ("I feel for ...") **Empathy involves putting yourself into another person's shoes to try to understand how the person experiences a situation from within his/her world.** You need to listen for the speaker's emotional meaning, as well as listen to content.

In longer conversations, you should ideally build your relationship with the speaker by focusing on what the speaker is both doing and saying. Observe and mirror the actions and expressions of the speaker. This technique is called pacing, and can be used to help the speaker feel at ease. **Pacing involves imitating or mirroring the speaker's breathing, voice rate and volume, vocabulary, favourite phrases, and facial expressions.** You can match the speaker's behaviour by speeding up or slowing down your voice, using the same words and phrases, using similar gestures, and even breathing at the same rate. The speaker will notice the similarities and feel more comfortable. You will build rapport by showing that you are actively listening. Once again, be patient because this requires practice. To summarise:

EMPATHY vs. SYMPATHY

**"Empathy is understanding that someone needs a double whiskey.
Sympathy is buying them one."**

SYMPATHY: I feel what you are feeling.

EMPATHY: I understand how you are feeling.

APATHY: I don't care how you feel.





Both verbal and non-verbal messages will influence the success of the communication process. Non-verbal signals and body language include: **eye contact** (steady or interrupted glance), **body orientation** (facing squarely toward or away from another person), **posture** (rigid or relaxed body, lowered or raised head, posture shifts), **gestures** (nodding, turning, pointing, shaking, smiling, a wrinkled nose, protruded lips), and **body movements** (shrugs, foot movements).

By paying close attention to what people do rather than to the content of what they are saying, you will be able to observe patterns in their behaviour that they cannot consciously manipulate, such as positive words but negative gestures or body movements. A speaker who says he is relaxed about an issue while continually tapping his or her foot might really be “saying” something else.

It is also important to observe the interpersonal distance used by the speaker, taking note of cultural differences (for example, an Arab tends to stand closer than an American). Researchers have found that interpersonal distances seem to expand and shrink, depending on the circumstances. If the speaker is very close, your relationship might be more intimate. However, if the speaker is intruding on your personal body space, he or she might be demanding your attention. If you and the speaker are far apart, you might be in a public setting or the speaker might be uneasy or aloof.

Interpersonal distance is just one of the factors that can affect the content of your exchange with the speaker.

Other factors include:

- **the nature of your relationship**
- **the nature of the activity**
- **your emotions, and**
- **the situation.**

The more the listener understands and appreciates these factors, the more successful he or she is likely to be.

Being aware of the speaker’s non-verbal messages and showing that you are really listening through your own non-verbal messages (e.g., matching the speaker’s body language by mirroring posture) can also significantly improve your effectiveness as a listener. Focus on what is being said and ignore irritating aspects of how the message is being conveyed (e.g., annoying mannerisms or incorrect pronunciation). Sending positive signals with your body shows the speaker that you are becoming actively involved in the communication process, and that you are building your overall levels of empathy with the speaker.

▼ Feedback

People tend to pay attention to and comprehend only a small percentage of the information that is directed at them. Listening needs to be an active process, not a passive process. Listen specifically in order to identify the main points being made by the speaker.

Ask questions to get additional facts and explore the problem from all sides. Signal to the speaker that you understand by nodding, and ask questions if you don't understand something. These cues provide feedback to the speaker and indicate that the speaker's message is getting across to you.

Paraphrasing is repeating back to the speaker the essence of the main ideas, thoughts, and issues. It is not about parroting back exactly what the speaker has said, but it helps to repeat the most important words stressed by the speaker.

Paraphrasing gives the speaker an opportunity to explore the issues, establish new connections, and provide more detail. It is a technique that enables you to bring together the threads of the speaker's message.



A good listener focuses on feelings as well as thoughts. While paraphrasing is concerned with thoughts, reflecting the feelings of the speaker is focused on emotions. Understanding the speaker's feelings provides a basis for understanding the speaker's attitudes, beliefs, and decisions. To reflect feelings, you will need to learn words that label emotions and their intensity.

Listed here are categories of feelings:

- **happy (excited, cheerful, content)**
- **sad (hopeless, upset, lost)**
- **angry (furious, annoyed, put out)**
- **scared (fearful, insecure, unsure)**
- **confused (troubled, disorganised, undecided)**
- **strong (powerful, confident, secure)**
- **weak (overwhelmed, helpless, shaky).**

To reflect feelings:

- **Use the pronoun "you"**
- **Use the word or words that describe the emotion**
- **Use a "stem" sentence such as "You seem to feel ...", or "It sounds like you feel ..."**
- **Add a context or situation "You feel angry when your boss criticises..."**

As the speaker's intense feelings subside, you can communicate empathy and understanding by reflecting the speaker's feelings. Reflective listening also helps you to set the tone and mood of your discussion.

Putting the speaker's points into your own words is a way to stay alert and show that you are taking in the information being presented. This technique is helpful when someone asks you to be a sounding board, since it communicates understanding. Let the message sink in without trying to make decisions about it.

By summarising regularly, you have a chance to hear if your thinking is accurate and give the speaker a "breather." By bringing together the key elements of what has been presented, you will also show that you are involved and accurately hear the speaker, and are ready to listen to more detail. Summarising will help bring all of the discussion into focus and encourage the speaker to continue talking.

Effective listeners know that their minds and memories are imperfect. Taking notes can help you identify important points and follow confused or disorganised speakers. Writing down things can be also be helpful when you need to remember accurately detailed information. Use your judgment as to when it is appropriate to take notes (e.g., in some situations, you might need to ask permission to write notes). Carry a small note pad and pen so that you are prepared to make notes. Write down the speaker's key ideas rather than complete sentences that might interrupt the flow of the conversation. You might like to develop your own shorthand (e.g., abbreviations, symbols, or words) so that you can note information quickly and keep focused. Even if you write little or nothing, pen and paper will communicate that you are trying to be attentive.

Speakers don't always say what they mean and they often don't mean what they say. As a result, you need to gather together what you have observed and heard from the speaker's words, behaviours, and feelings, and paraphrase your understanding to the speaker. Use responses that paraphrase, clarify, or summarise the message to check that you have understood both the content of the speaker's message and the attitude or feelings behind the message. Don't simply parrot back the speaker's own words. A good response rephrases the speaker's concerns in a fresh way, such as "In other words ...", or "You're saying ..."

By putting the feeling and the content together, you will be able to gain a better understanding of the speaker's meaning.

By checking that you have accurately understood what is being communicated, you will be better able to decide on an appropriate response (solve the problem, ignore it, or stop it from happening in the future). It is also important to recognise that different communications have different purposes and therefore need different listening techniques, as the table on the next page indicates.



Main Purposes of Communication

<p>1. SOCIAL COMMUNICATION</p> <p>People speak to each other to maintain a relationship or acknowledge each other's presence rather than exchange information. People manage surface impressions and generally present themselves in a favourable light.</p> <p>Examples: small talk, common courtesies, etc.</p> <p><i>Appropriate listening involves:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Taking part in social rituals, taking turns in talking and listening, being friendly</i> • <i>Recognising social cues and responding appropriately, e.g., according to the level of relationship.</i> 	<p>2. INFORMATIONAL COMMUNICATION</p> <p>People speak to each other to exchange information or convey factual knowledge.</p> <p>Examples: a sales person explains a product to a customer or two colleagues discuss work after meeting each other.</p> <p><i>Appropriate listening involves:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Accurate receipt of information</i> • <i>Processing the information (getting the meaning, and remembering)</i> • <i>Mental rehearsal to remember data</i> • <i>Reflective listening to check information.</i>
<p>3. EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION</p> <p>People speak to each other to express opinions, attitudes, or feelings, as well as to understand each other's position. This kind of communication takes place when people have a misunderstanding or conflict with someone.</p> <p>Examples: sharing a happy experience, resolving a dispute, a customer making a complaint, etc.</p> <p><i>Appropriate listening involves:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Patient listening to let the other person vent their feelings</i> • <i>Reflective listening when someone asks you to be a "sounding board"</i> • <i>Communicating empathy and understanding.</i> 	<p>4. PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION</p> <p>The speaker attempts to persuade and influence the listener to do something. The speaker might have a bias for or a prejudice against a particular course of action, a person or a product.</p> <p>Examples: a simple request to change one's mind or attitude, or to make a donation, or a salesperson explaining the advantages of a product or service.</p> <p><i>Appropriate listening involves:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Getting clear about what is being asked of you</i> • <i>Using reflective listening to clarify and confirm what is wanted and to avoid misunderstanding.</i>

▼ Finish

Your listening habits reflect how you listen to others. Good listeners avoid the barriers and adopt positive habits.

Take a personal inventory: How do you rate yourself as a listener? What percentage of each day do you spend listening? How do others (your manager, co-workers, direct reports, spouse/lover, children, friends) rate you as a listener? How do you rate others as listeners? How committed are you to taking action and improving your listening? One way in which you might develop your listening skills in the future is by doing the following:

- **List your five best listening habits** (e.g., making good eye contact, asking questions for clarification).
- **List three of your worst listening habits** (e.g., jumping to conclusions, losing your temper).
- **List two good listening habits that you would like to have that you don't have now.**
- **List two poor listening habits that you would like to avoid.**

Of course, practising good listening skills will make you a more effective listener. After identifying your listening problems, decide on the improvements you want to make and plan some definite and positive action steps. Then practice specific listening skills whenever you get an opportunity.

Developing good listening skills is a continuous process. By discovering your listening strengths and improving your listening attitude, you will achieve greater personal success and strengthen both your personal and work relationships.



Listening Skill Building Template

