**Listening Skills**

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

Listening is a 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.

**Listening and Hearing**

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.

**Active & Passive Listening**

**Active listening** is a skill that can be acquired and developed with practice. However, active listening can be difficult to master and will, therefore, take time and [patience](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/patience.html) to develop.

***Active listening*** means, as its name suggests, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively ‘hearing’ the message of the speaker.

Active listening involves listening with all senses.  As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the ‘active listener’ is also ‘seen’ to be listening - otherwise the speaker may conclude that what they are talking about is uninteresting to the listener.

Interest can be conveyed to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages such as maintaining eye contact, nodding your head and smiling, agreeing by saying ‘Yes’ or simply ‘Mmm hmm’ to encourage them to continue.  By providing this 'feedback' the person speaking will usually feel more at ease and therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly.

**Passive Listening** is listening without reacting: Allowing someone to speak, without interrupting. Not doing anything else at the same time.

**Stages of Listening**

**Receiving**

Receiving is the intentional focus on hearing a speaker’s message, which happens when we filter out other sources so that we can isolate the message and avoid the confusing mixture of incoming stimuli. At this stage, we are still only hearing the message.

**Understanding**

In the understanding stage, we attempt to learn the meaning of the message, which is not always easy. For one thing, if a speaker does not enunciate clearly, it may be difficult to tell what the message was—did your friend say, “I think she’ll be late for class,” or “my teacher delayed the class”?

**Remembering**

**Remembering** begins with listening; if you can’t remember something that was said, you might not have been listening effectively. The most common reason for not remembering a message after the fact is because it wasn’t really learned in the first place.

**Evaluating**

The fourth stage in the listening process is evaluating, or judging the value of the message. We might be thinking, “This makes sense” or, conversely, “This is very odd.” Because everyone embodies biases and perspectives learned from widely diverse sets of life experiences, evaluations of the same message can vary widely from one listener to another. Even the most open-minded listeners will have opinions of a speaker, and those opinions will influence how the message is evaluated. People are more likely to evaluate a message positively if the speaker speaks clearly, presents ideas logically, and gives reasons to support the points made.

Unfortunately, personal opinions sometimes result in prejudiced evaluations. Imagine you’re listening to a speech given by someone from another country and this person has an accent that is hard to understand. You may have a hard time simply making out the speaker’s message. Some people find a foreign accent to be interesting or even exotic, while others find it annoying or even take it as a sign of ignorance. If a listener has a strong bias against foreign accents, the listener may not even attempt to attend to the message. If you mistrust a speaker because of an accent, you could be rejecting important or personally enriching information. Good listeners have learned to refrain from making these judgments and instead to focus on the speaker’s meanings.

**Responding**

Responding, sometimes referred to as feedback, is the fifth and final stage of the listening process. It’s the stage at which you indicate your involvement. Almost anything you do at this stage can be interpreted as feedback. For example, you are giving positive feedback to your instructor if at the end of class you stay behind to finish a sentence in your notes or approach the instructor to ask for clarification. The opposite kind of feedback is given by students who gather their belongings and rush out the door as soon as class is over.  This stage is represented by the lips because we often give feedback in the form of verbal feedback; however, you can just as easily respond nonverbally.

**Strategies of Effective Listening**

* Ask others who speak rapidly to slow down or pause from time to time. Say, “I can understand you better if you speak more slowly.”
* Ask others to look at you when they speak to you and speak a little more loudly. Facial expressions and lip reading can help supplement hearing. Say, “I can hear you better if you look at me and speak a little louder.”
* Ask others to rephrase, not repeat the same information if you do not understand something the first time around. If you hear it in a different way, you have a greater chance of understanding the message. Say, “Can you tell me this in a different way, please?”
* Instead of saying “huh?” “what?” or “pardon?,” try repeating what you heard and ask for clarification. Say, “I heard you say something about this—- but I missed what you said after that.”
* Try to move closer to the person you want to hear well.
* In noisy environments, position your back to the noise. This will help you focus on the person speaking in front of you.
* Move to a well-lit, quieter location where background noise is less likely to interfere with the conversation.
* Be your own advocate. Do not hesitate to ask for clarification.
* You can also suggest ways others can help you hear well. It’s important not to bluff or nod your way through a conversation.

**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.

**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.

**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 listener thinks 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 listener hears 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 concerns of the speaker.