

Strategies for Effective Listening

1. Have a positive attitude about what you are going to hear.

In general, attentive listening is easy if you are interested in, or need, the information. If, however, you decide it will be too difficult, boring, or doesn't relate to you, listening attentively will be difficult. The first step to listening attentively is to talk yourself into a positive attitude before you start listening. Your brain is both your best ally and worst enemy. If you have a negative attitude, your brain will automatically pay less attention. No matter how hard you try to listen, your brain will actually prevent you from absorbing and understanding. On the other hand, if you are positive, your brain will help you listen with less effort and remembering will be easier. If you have a "yes, I can" attitude, your brain will make sure you do listen and learn.

2. Make a commitment to listen attentively.

Just as in other kinds of learning, you must decide that you are going to listen carefully and focus on the speaker's words. If you have even a whisper of a doubt in your mind about whether you are going to listen, you will find your mind wandering and you will end up doing marginal listening instead of paying full attention.

3. Be physically fit. Listening is actually a physical activity just like running, walking, or exercising. When you listen attentively your heart rate increases, your respiration

speeds up, and your temperature rises. You can increase your listening abilities by simply making sure that you are physically fit.

4. **Be Alert.** If you are tired, your body simply doesn't have the resources to listen and understand effectively. When there is something you want to know or learn, make sure to get a good night's sleep before you expose yourself to the information.
5. **Eat Smart.** Eat a little bit before you go into a listening session from which you need to get information. If you try to listen right after a big meal, your body will be diverting energy to digestion and leaving little for concentration. After a big meal, your body naturally wants to sleep, so you may fall asleep in class after a big meal with lots of sweets? On the other hand, make sure you are not hungry. Hunger will also distract you and keep you from paying full attention.
6. **Be comfortable.** Find a seat that is comfortable to sit in. Don't be too warm or too cold. Sit where you can hear well and see the speaker clearly. In a classroom or lecture situation, sit in the front of the room. The closer you are to the speaker, the more likely you are to pay attention because you feel that the speaker can see you and will notice if you fall asleep or if your attention wanders. Those people who sit in the back have usually already made a decision that they aren't really interested and don't intend to listen. They may talk, eat, fidget...all things that will distract your attention.
7. **Be an active listener.** Make regular eye contact with the speaker. This helps you pay attention and concentrate. It also gives the speaker the feedback he/she needs. Sit up straight and even lean forward a little. This is part of making a commitment to listen. With this posture, you are telling *yourself* and the speaker that you intend to listen. It also means that you are more likely to remember.
8. **Listen to the Whole Message Before Making a Judgement** Don't jump to conclusions. Listen critically to everything the speaker says before making an decisions or taking any actions.
9. **Paraphrase** As you listen, put the speaker's ideas into your own words. This makes sure that you understand what is being said. It also makes the ideas your own. If you can paraphrase what a speaker says it means you understand. Your brain can only use and store information that makes sense to you in your own words.
10. **Concentrate** Focus on the details you are hearing and work to keep your mind from wandering by simply telling yourself "listen to this". Concentrating 100% of the time is difficult for anyone, but you can work to increase your concentration. As you listen to something, simply place a check mark on a piece of scrap paper every time you find your attention has wandered. At the end of the presentation, count the number of check marks. Just making a check mark acts as a reminder to listen and refocus on the message. Soon, your brain will catch itself daydreaming and, through practice, will automatically put you back on track. Concentrating means listening to the whole message before you act. When you are trying to follow oral instructions, it is often tempting to try to do each step as it is given. This rarely works because you have to shift your attention away from the words you are hearing to the activities you are trying to perform. Listen to the whole set of instructions first
11. **Remove Distractions.** Small things can eat away at your ability to concentrate: a ticking clock, a pile of unfinished laundry, the telephone, a wobbly desk. When you

find your attention wandering, identify the thing that distracted your attention and do something about it.

12. **Learn to Block Out Distractions** Some distractions can't be removed, so you must learn to live with them. With practice and a commitment to listen, you can learn to block out the unimportant sounds around you just as easily as you block out the sounds of heavy traffic or household noises. The next group of listening strategies can make your mass listening experiences more effective. Use them when listening to lectures and classroom lessons.
13. **Be Prepared.** In a formal listening situation, prepare yourself to listen by reading and thinking about the topic before you arrive. Do as much as you can to learn specific vocabulary and concepts before you start to listen, so that you don't have to waste time and energy understanding the basics.
14. **Listen for Main Ideas** Well-prepared lectures, lessons, and oral presentations are designed to make listening easier. The introduction should contain the main idea and purpose in a clear thesis statement. For instance, "**Spousal abuse**, whether it is **physical** or **psychological**, robs everyone involved. Its **effects** fan out from the act itself like ripples in a pond causing **lasting harm** to everything and everyone it touches. **Understanding** its widespread effects is the first step to **eliminating** it." Listen for these and focus on them. The main idea will probably be restated several times during the presentation. Each time you hear it, use it to refocus your attention.
15. **Listen for major headings** The introduction of an oral presentation will also probably include a "blueprint" statement which clearly outlines the major points the speaker will cover. Here's an example: "Spousal abuse reaches out and changes forever the life of not only the **abused individual**, but also those of the **abuser**, the **immediate family**, the **extended family**, and the **whole community**." Remember these major headings as you listen, and mentally tick them off as the speaker deals with each one in turn.
16. **Listen for numbered lists** Effective speakers understand that listening can be more challenging than reading, so they use strategies to help the listeners keep track of the information they are presenting. In the presentation on spousal abuse, the speaker might say, "Spousal abuse strikes at least **FIVE** targets. The **FIRST** and most obvious is...." A **SECOND** major loser in this domestic tragedy is...." "Perhaps the **MOST TRAGIC CASUALTIES** in these situations are the children." "**THE FOURTH IMPORTANT GROUP** of victims are...." "**THE FIFTH AND LAST**, but by no means least affected, is"
12. **Listen for repetition.** One thing that makes listening more difficult than reading is the fact that the listener can't go back and review or reread the material. For this reason, a good speaker includes lots of repetition of the main points and important details. When introducing major headings, the speaker may actually say, "The **abuser** and the **abused** are definitely victims, but perhaps the most **tragic victims** in these situations are the **children**." Listening for these repetitions not only helps you remember the major points, but also helps the listener keep track of where the speaker is in his/her overall speech.
13. **Listen for transitions and other structural devices.** Transitions like "however", "in addition", or "on the other hand" act like sign posts to show the listener where the

speaker is going next. Sections of an oral presentation can be highlighted with words like "Let's review what we know so far." or "Before continuing, an investigation of some side issues is in order." or "In conclusion".

14. **Pay attention to visuals.** Charts, graphs, overheads, props or anything you can see have an important place in oral presentations. They help you understand the main ideas and visualize the importance of details like statistics. As well, they can act as a mnemonic that will make it easier for you to remember. Visuals are included to help you understand. Be sure to make full use of them as you listen or speak.
15. **Pay attention to the speaker's voice.** Speakers use their voices to underline important words, phrases, or sections of their presentation. The voice sends about 30% of the actual message. When the speaker speaks slowly, the information is usually important. Pauses allow the listeners to gather their thoughts and review what has been said. As well, presenters add emotion to their speeches with pitch and tone. It is particularly important to pay attention to these when the presentation is persuasive. Be aware that the speaker may use his/her voice to get an emotional response from you and to make you more open to persuasion.
16. **Watch the speaker's body language, gestures, facial expressions.** Textbooks on communications suggest that as much as 50% of any oral message is sent with body language. Learn to watch for gestures, facial expressions, and posture as you listen. They cannot only tell you a lot about the speaker's truthfulness, enthusiasm, and expertise, but they can also act as a memory aid. In other words, "listen between the lines" to get the full meaning.
17. **Ask Questions.** To listen successfully, the listener needs to understand the message being sent clearly. If you don't understand, or even if you just feel "fuzzy", ask the speaker for more information or clarification. Don't give up until YOU do understand. Some people feel uncomfortable asking questions, particularly in a group situation, for fear they may look "stupid". Work to get rid of this notion! There is no such thing as a "stupid" question. If you have a question, it's probably because the speaker didn't meet your learning needs. Think of yourself first and ask for the information YOU need. You will soon discover that in most cases, many people had the same need for information or clarification that you did, but they were just afraid to ask, so you will be doing everyone a service.
18. **Listen critically.** Select what is important in any message. Filter out your own (or the speaker's) anger, hostility, fatigue. Evaluate the believability and accuracy of the message by thinking about the speaker's experience, knowledge, and motives as well as the logic, supports, and statistics of the content. Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions or make a final judgment until you've listened to the whole presentation. Pay attention to what is left out as well as what is included. Sometimes people are persuasive because they omit the negative details.
19. **Make Notes** Taking notes while someone is speaking is a skill that requires lots of practice because it is easy to get so involved in writing that you stop listening for minutes at a time. When you finally do tune-in again, you may have missed some really important facts or concepts. Here are some tips: **Don't try to write every word.** Record mostly main ideas, major headings, important supports, dates, and statistics. **Use the "empty" moments to make your notes.** Speakers deliver words at about 120

words a minute, but your brain works two or three times faster than that. Often you can predict what the speaker will say next, so once you're sure where the speaker is going with a thought, you can make a quick note. If some of the material is familiar to you or you already grasp a concept well, use these moments for recording other important ideas. **Develop your own short hand symbols** like \$ for dollars or money; + for positive or good; ! for important; → for future, toward, to, direction; ← for past, yesterday, from; ± for now, today. For words that you write often create your own symbols like ¶ for paragraph; R for required, necessary; E for with; W for what; N for not, never, don't.

Use short forms where possible and develop your own abbreviations like "imp" for important; "ing" for ingredients; "ss" for small; "bb" for big, large. **Rewrite your notes immediately** after a presentation. Because you are using short forms and abbreviations, your notes may be next to meaningless if you leave them in this form too long. Rewrite them in longer form while your memory of the presentation is still clear. Add details, facts and explanations to your point form lists as soon as possible. Rewriting your notes in greater detail serves several purposes. First, it ensures that your notes will be meaningful days or weeks later. Second, it takes advantage of your short term memory. Third, writing is an effective way for many people to learn new materials. Fourth, it acts as a review and helps place the information in your long term memory.

20. **Review What You've Listened to within 2 to 3 hours...then daily or weekly.** Listening is like any other form of learning: "Use it, or lose it." To be useful, review information regularly so all of it will be available when you want it.