

# Listening

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Listening is at least half of communication, but doesn't get as much attention as a skill you can develop as writing and speaking. In this lesson, you will learn about the importance of listening and the skill of active listening, including:

1. [Active Listening](#)
2. [Speaking for Active Listening](#)

## 1. Active Listening

How many times have you wanted to talk about a subject very important to you only to find that the people you're talking to aren't really listening? They may look like they're listening, but they're not paying attention at all. Perhaps you've given a presentation at work or at school and noticed half the audience are whispering to one another or playing on their phones. Frustrating, isn't it?

How about being on the flip side? How often do you spend a conversation so eager to share your ideas that you completely stop listening to the person who's talking? Perhaps you even allow yourself to get distracted by your devices while someone is talking to you. What information and connections have you missed while poorly listening?



### BRAINSTORM

Make a list of all the ways you can tell if people are, or are not, listening.

Communication isn't just about talking: it's about listening. As you saw in the social communication model, effective communication only happens when all parties are engaged in uncovering and understanding the meaning behind the words. Though a person may be described as "a great communicator," because they can speak persuasively or compose an impressive sentence, the best communicators are also good listeners.



### HINT

Remember that the first guideline of effective communication is knowing your audience, and there's no better way to do this than simply listening!

However, listening is more than sitting still and paying attention. In fact, listening is a skill you develop, just like public speaking or writing. The best practices for communicating as a listener are often grouped under the term **active listening**. This term refers to a set of learned skills that help other people communicate with you and feel heard.

During active listening, listeners give feedback to the speaker, confirming an understanding of what the speaker has said by asking questions and making clarifying statements. Rather than focusing on what they want to say once it's their turn to speak or allowing themselves to be distracted, listeners reassure the speaker that they're interested in the subject matter and want to completely understand the point the speaker is trying to make. It's the ultimate way of making a fellow participant feel valued in the conversation.



**Pay close attention**



**Ask open-ended questions**



**Give good nonverbal cues**



**Minimize distractions**



**Avoid making judgments, conclusions  
or giving advice until asked**

Here are some key skills you should master in order to be an active listener:

1. **Pay close attention and paraphrase to ensure understanding:** If you can step into the conversation by saying, “So let me see if I understand this correctly. What you’re saying is....” then you’re practicing active listening. If you’re saying, “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” but not recapping a set of statements, then you are listening passively. It is more likely that you will misunderstand or miss something and less likely you will remember it later.

2. **Ask open-ended questions:** These questions can encourage the speaker to elaborate on a point, rather than forcing them to say yes or no. This elaboration can also help you understand better what the speaker is trying to communicate. Prompts like “Can you say more about that?” or “What did you do next?” will clue the speaker as to which aspects of their speech are most interesting to you, or where they need to elaborate for clarity.
3. **Give good nonverbal cues:** Make eye contact, lean in while the speaker is talking, and don’t let your gaze drift away. If you’re leaning back in a chair or reading what’s on your computer monitor, the speaker isn’t going to feel like you’re paying attention—even if you are! You can also use body cues to reflect the speaker’s emotions—you don’t have to laugh or cry along, but you can indicate a level of understanding with a facial expression or a nod.
4. **Minimize distractions:** Turn off your radio, mute your phone and put it face-down, or push your monitor in another direction in order to pay closer attention to what your guest has to say. When someone is talking to you, do your best to minimize anything that could steal your attention away from the conversation.
5. **Avoid making judgments, conclusions, or giving advice until asked:** Avoid sharing how you handled a similar issue, unless you’re specifically asked for advice. Keep an open mind about the subject matter, even if you don’t agree. If someone is complaining about your previous behavior or choices, wait until they are done before you launch into a defense. Better yet, don’t launch into a defense. Instead, ask clarifying questions and make sure that you totally understand the other person’s point of view before crafting your response.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Robin tells Kim that he needs to talk about something important. Kim can tell by his tone that she needs to demonstrate good listening skills, so she turns off her computer monitor. This minimizes interruptions and communicates to Robin that Kim is ready to listen.

Besides communicating effectively, active listening has the benefits of making other people feel valued. You can use these skills to manage conflict, soothe angry customers or coworkers, and lift the spirits of people who are feeling unhappy. Often, all a person wants is to be heard, and you can give them that opportunity. This is what communication is ultimately about.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Active Listening**

A set of learned skills that help other people communicate with you and feel heard.

## 2. Speaking for Active Listening

Those are just a few techniques you can use to become a better listener, but there are also a few ways to ensure that you are understood. By flipping around some of the active listening tips, you can turn them into tips for how best to be understood by active listeners.

- **Use silence strategically:** If you are doing most of the talking, be sure to pause at effective times. This gives listeners a chance to process what you’ve told them so far. It also gives them a chance to ask questions, paraphrase, or practice their own active listening skills!

- **Help your audience by paraphrasing:** If your listener isn't breaking in to clarify their understanding of your point, then do it for them! Pause mid-point and say, "Let me stop here for a moment. Am I being clear about what I'm trying to say? Is there anything up to this point that you'd like me to go over again?" By posing these types of questions, you're encouraging your audience to participate in active listening.
- **Minimize distractions:** Don't be afraid to ask your audience to silence any background noise for a moment while you make an important point.
- **Be aware of time:** Listeners will often lose interest the longer a speaker talks. Help your listeners allocate their attention by letting them know how long you will speak, and stick to that schedule. If you are giving a presentation, it can help to number your ideas and points, so the audience has a sense of progress. If you say you have seven points to make, and you're on point seven fifteen minutes later, the listeners have a much better chance of staying attentive than if you are still on point one after fifteen minutes and they aren't sure how many more there will be! Research suggests that the average person's attention span begins to decay after 20 minutes, so plan on a break, a pause for questions, or simply finishing your speech in that amount of time.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Pia has been frustrated by the amount of heavy drinking that happens at office parties, and after a particularly notable evening, she makes an appointment to talk to Nadine in Human Resources about her concerns. When Pia enters her office, Nadine prepares to be an active listener by turning off her computer monitor and putting her phone in a drawer; Pia silences her phone and puts it in her pocket. Pia communicates her concerns clearly by first summarizing what she has noticed as a trend at office parties, and then speaking in more detail about what she witnessed at the previous night's event, before pausing to wait for Nadine's response. Nadine engages in active listening by asking Pia to say more about how the heavy drinking she witnessed made her feel and how it has impacted her team's work. After Pia is done speaking, Nadine paraphrases what she has heard, repeating back the reasons why Pia feels uncomfortable at these office parties. Even before Pia and Nadine move on to making a plan for addressing the office party culture, Pia feels better because Nadine has demonstrated through active listening that she is taking her concerns seriously.

Without listening, there is no understanding. By listening, you can assess your audience's needs and address them. By ensuring that you're heard, you can deliver results. Often by active listening, you can mitigate or even solve the problem, such as talking to an angry customer or disgruntled colleague. Sometimes people just want to be heard and understood.



Active listening is a skill, and, like any skill, it improves with practice. In many contexts, people practice through role-play, inviting someone to tell them a real or hypothetical problem while practicing these skills, then receiving feedback on how they did. Try this with one of your friends, classmates, or colleagues.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the importance of developing effective listening skills. You considered the practice of **active listening** and how it can enable and refine communication. In many ways, listening is the most important element in the communication process. By developing and practicing

active listening skills you are positioning yourself to become a master communicator. You also learned how you can tune your **speaking for active listening**, giving your audience opportunities and encouragement to listen actively as well.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

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