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Homework Center - Speaking & Listening Skills

## Listening Skills

You probably spend more time using your listening skills than any other kind of skill. Like other skills, listening takes practice.

**What does it mean to really listen?**

**Real listening is an active process that has three basic steps.**

1. **Hearing.** Hearing just means listening enough to catch what the speaker is saying. For example, say you were listening to a report on zebras, and the speaker mentioned that no two are alike. If you can repeat the fact, then you have heard what has been said.
2. **Understanding.** The next part of listening happens when you take what you have heard and understand it in your own way. Let's go back to that report on zebras. When you hear that no two are alike, think about what that might mean. You might think, "Maybe this means that the pattern of stripes is different for each zebra."
3. **Judging.** After you are sure you understand what the speaker has said, think about whether it makes sense. Do you believe what you have heard? You might think, "How could the stripes be different for every zebra? But then again, the fingerprints are different for every person. I think this seems believable."

**Tips for being a good listener**

1. Give your full attention on the person who is speaking. Don't look out the window or at what else is going on in the room.
2. Make sure your mind is focused, too. It can be easy to let your mind wander if you think you know what the person is going to say next, but you might be wrong! If you feel your mind wandering, change the position of your body and try to concentrate on the speaker's words.
3. Let the speaker finish before you begin to talk. Speakers appreciate having the chance to say everything they would like to say without being interrupted. When you interrupt, it looks like you aren't listening, even if you really are.
4. Let yourself finish listening before you begin to speak! You can't really listen if you are busy thinking about what you want say next.
5. Listen for main ideas. The main ideas are the most important points the speaker wants to get across. They may be mentioned at the start or end of a talk, and repeated a number of times. Pay special attention to statements that begin with phrases such as "My point is..." or "The thing to remember is..."
6. Ask questions. If you are not sure you understand what the speaker has said, just ask. It is a good idea to repeat in your own words what the speaker said so that you can be sure your understanding is correct. For example, you might say, "When you said that no two zebras are

alike, did you mean that the stripes are different on each one?"

7. Give feedback. Sit up straight and look directly at the speaker. Now and then, nod to show that you understand. At appropriate points you may also smile, frown, laugh, or be silent. These are all ways to let the speaker know that you are really listening. Remember, you listen with your face as well as your ears!

### Thinking fast

**Remember: time is on your side! Thoughts move about four times as fast as speech. With practice, while you are listening you will also be able to think about what you are hearing, really understand it, and give feedback to the speaker.**

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## Listening Skills

The average college student spends about 14 hours per week in class listening (or perhaps I should say "hearing"--there is a difference!) to lectures. See if you can improve your listening skills by following some of the strategies below:

**Maintain eye contact with the instructor.** Of course you will need to look at your notebook to write your notes, but eye contact keeps you focused on the job at hand and keeps you involved in the lecture.

**Focus on content, not delivery.** Have you ever counted the number of times a teacher clears his/her throat in a fifteen minute period? If so, you weren't focusing on content.

**Avoid emotional involvement.** When you are too emotionally involved in listening, you tend to hear what you want to hear--not what is actually being said. Try to remain objective and open-minded.

**Avoid distractions.** Don't let your mind wander or be distracted by the person shuffling papers near you. If the classroom is too hot or too cold try to remedy that situation if you can. The solution may require that you dress more appropriately to the room temperature.

**Treat listening as a challenging mental task.** Listening to an academic lecture is not a passive act--at least it shouldn't be. You need to concentrate on what is said so that you can process the information into your notes.

**Stay active by asking mental questions.** Active listening keeps you on your toes. Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you listen. What key point is the professor making? How does this fit with what I know from previous lectures? How is this lecture organized?

**Use the gap between the rate of speech and your rate of thought.** You can think faster than the lecturer can talk. That's one reason your mind may tend to wander. All the above suggestions will help you keep your mind occupied and focused on what being said. You can actually begin to anticipate what the professor is going to say as a way to keep your mind from straying. Your mind does have the capacity to listen, think, write and ponder at the same time, but it does take practice.



## TASSEL

To help me  
not get distracted when  
I take notes.

**T**ry not to doodle while taking notes.

**A**rrive at each class prepared.

**S**it near the front of the classroom.

**S**it away from friends.

**E**nd daydreaming.

**L**ook at the teacher.

### **T**ry not to doodle while taking notes.

- Doodling breaks your concentration and takes your focus away from note taking.
- Each time you feel yourself wanting to doodle, take that urge and write down what the teacher is saying.



### **A**rrive at each class prepared.

- Read all assigned readings and review all previous lecture notes so that you will understand

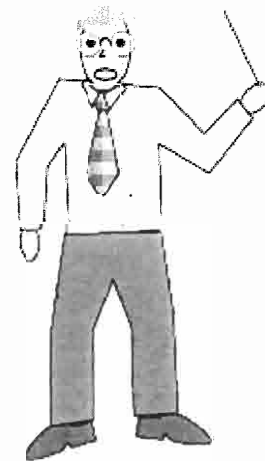
what is covered in the lecture.

- If you are not prepared, you will be more likely to daydream and become distracted.



### **S**it near the front of the classroom.

- Sit near the front so that you can clearly see the teacher, the chalkboard, and any overheads, Power Point or computer presentation.



### **S**it away from friends.

- If you sit near friends, you will be tempted to talk or pass notes to them.
- If you have assigned seats and you have to sit near friends, resist talking to them or passing notes during class.



### **E**nd daydreaming.

- If you become aware that you are daydreaming, immediately change your

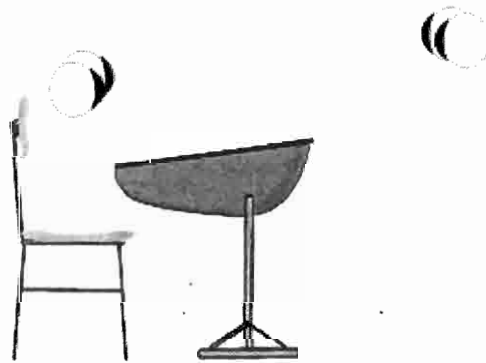


position. Sit forward and look at the teacher's eyes.

- Turn your attention to the teacher and write down whatever s/he is saying even if you may later find that it was not important.

## **L**ook at the teacher.

- Make eye contact with the teacher as much as possible. This will give the feeling that you are having a conversation with the teacher.
- Whenever you are not taking notes or looking at the chalkboard, overheads, Power Point presentation, or computer screen, keep your eyes on the teacher.



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# ELI 162

## Paraphrasing

### Steps and Examples

by Deborah Healey

Step 1: Understand what you are reading. If you don't understand it, you can't paraphrase it correctly. That's guaranteed.

Step 2: Think about the ideas, especially how the ideas may relate to your specific topic.

Step 3: **Not looking at the original**, write down the ideas.

Step 4: Look back at the original to see if you have changed the grammar and vocabulary. If not, change them now.

### Sample:

Original:

Named for James Brady, the White House press secretary who was shot and wounded by John Hinckley Jr. during the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in March 1981, the Brady Bill establishes a national waiting period and background check for the purchase of a handgun. (Bender, 1995: 137)

Phrases to avoid from the original are in **bold**:

**Named for James Brady**, the White House press secretary who was shot and wounded by John Hinckley Jr. **during the attempted assassination** of President Ronald Reagan in March 1981, **the Brady Bill establishes** a national waiting period and background check for the **purchase of a handgun**. (Bender, 1995: 137)

Ideas:

Brady bill = named for White House press secretary James Brady

Brady was shot during an assassination attempt on President Reagan

Brady bill provisions = people who want to buy handguns have a waiting period and check on their backgrounds

Changing the order of ideas, grammar, and vocabulary:

Bender (1995) explains that people who want to buy handguns in the US now have a waiting period and a background check as a result of the Brady Bill. The bill was

named after White House press secretary James Brady, who was wounded during an assassination attempt on President Reagan. (137).

Notice how the grammar and vocabulary have been changed wherever possible in the paraphrase.

## Exercise

1. Look at the following quotation. On a piece of paper, write down the phrases that you need to avoid.

Downlut believes the Brady bill trespasses on the rights of law-abiding citizens, and is therefore inconsistent with the Constitution, because it imposes a waiting period on exercising the right to own guns. (Bender, 1995: 137)

2. Now on your piece of paper list the ideas that you will include.
3. Next, **cover up the original** and write a paraphrase.
4. Check for the underlined words, ideas, and a change in vocabulary and grammar.
5. Check your work with the model. How did you do?

## Feedback

How well did you understand the concepts and points in this lesson? (Select the closest appropriate option from the three buttons below):

Very Well

Not Sure

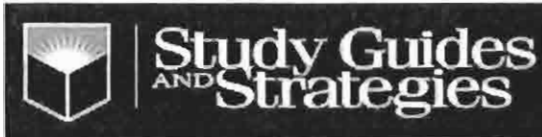
Not at all

Provide some comments about your experience in working through this exercise (e.g. I need some help, this was easy, etc.) Please be sure to explain your comments.

Your email

Your name

submit



## Active Listening

A good listener tries to understand thoroughly what the other person is saying. In the end he may disagree sharply, but before he disagrees, he wants to know exactly what it is...

Kenneth A. Wells,  
American

**Active, effective listening is a habit, as well as the foundation of effective communication.**

Active listening intentionally focuses on who you are listening to, whether in a group or one-on-one, in order to understand what he or she is saying. As the listener, you should then be able to repeat back in your own words what they have said to their satisfaction. This does not mean you agree with, but rather understand, what they are saying.

### What affects listening?

#### What do you think of the subject matter?

Is it new or have you a lot of experience with it?  
Will it be difficult to understand, or simple?  
Is it important to you, or just fun?

#### Is the speaker experienced or nervous?

What are the non-verbal cues of the speaker?  
What frame of mind is he or she?  
How personable, threatening, intelligent, etc.?



#### Is the message illustrated with visuals or examples?

Is technology used effectively?  
Are concepts introduced incrementally, or with examples?

#### Is the space conducive to listening? or to interaction or exchange with the speaker?

Are there avoidable distractions?

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**Described above are the external factors.**

**Now: what about you, the center, the listener?**

### **Prepare with a positive, engaged attitude**

- **Focus your attention on the subject**  
Stop all non-relevant activities beforehand to orient yourself to the speaker or the topic
- **Review mentally what you already know about the subject**  
Organize in advance relevant material in order to develop it further (previous lectures, TV programs, newspaper articles, web sites, prior real life experience, etc.)
- **Avoid distractions**  
Seat yourself appropriately close to the speaker  
Avoid distractions (a window, a talkative neighbor, noise, etc.)
- **Acknowledge any emotional state**  
Suspend emotions until later, or  
Passively participate unless you can control your emotions
- **Set aside your prejudices, your opinions**  
You are present to learn what the speaker has to say, not the other way around

### **Actively listen**

- **Be other-directed; focus on the person communicating**  
Follow and understand the speaker as if you were walking in their shoes  
Listen with your ears but also with your eyes and other senses
- **Be aware: non-verbally acknowledge points in the speech**  
Let the argument or presentation run its course  
Don't agree or disagree, but encourage the train of thought
- **Be involved:**  
Actively respond to questions and directions  
Use your body position (e.g. lean forward) and attention to encourage the speaker and signal your interest

### **Follow up activities**

#### **One-to-one**

**Give the speaker time and space**

#### **In a group/audience**

**Give the speaker space to regroup,**

for rest after talking

**Express appreciation** for the sharing  
to build trust and encourage dialogue

**Check if you have understood**

- **Restate**  
key points to affirm your understanding  
& build dialogue
- **Summarize**  
key points to affirm your understanding  
& build dialogue
- **Ask (non-threatening) questions**  
to build understanding

**Continue dialogue:**

- **Reflect on your experience**  
to demonstrate your interest (feedback)
- **Interpret**  
after you feel you have grasped content
- **Apply what you have learned**  
to a new situation

to debrief after talking

**During Q & A**

**If posing a question**

- Quickly express appreciation
- Briefly summarize a preliminary point
- Ask the relevant question

**If making a point**

- **Quickly express appreciation**
- **Briefly restate the relevant idea**  
as presented
- **State your idea, interpretation,**  
**reflection**
- **Invite a response**

**Continued development**

- **Get contact information**  
for later reference
- **Invite friends/colleagues/etc.**  
for discussion afterward
- **Write out a summary with questions**  
for further review

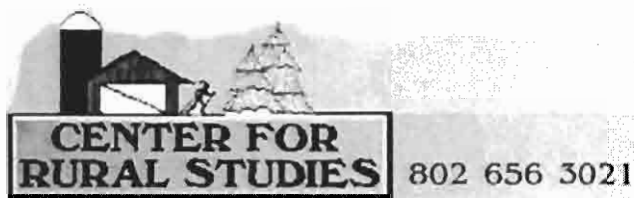
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## Exercise Four: Active Listening

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### EXERCISE 4 Active Listening

Think back to those few friends, mentors, counselors, or family members who have had the biggest impact on you. How would you characterize the communication between you? Was it helpful, meaningful, telepathic, or inspirational?

In one-to-one relationships with someone who knows us well, we are often in such complete synchronization that communication flows between us almost without words. Or so we feel. If this is the case, is it because we excel at expressing ourselves, or because we are masters of listening? Naturally, both are important, but, to turn a phrase, talk is cheap and listening is rare.

Chances are that those who influence us most are powerful listeners. Whether instinctively or through practice, they have developed the skill of empathy.

A University of Maine researcher, Dr. Marisue Pickering, identifies four characteristics of empathetic listeners:

1. Desire to be other-directed, rather than to project one's own feelings and ideas onto the other.
2. Desire to be non-defensive, rather than to protect the self. When the self is being protected, it is difficult to focus on another person.
3. Desire to imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as one's own.
4. Desire to listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and desire to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from or change in that person.

Further, she identifies ten discrete skills for empathetic listening, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Skills Associated with Empathy

SKILLS	EXPLANATION
1. Attending, acknowledging	1. Providing verbal or non-verbal awareness of the other, ie, eye contact
2. Restating, paraphrasing	2. Responding to person's basic verbal message
3. Reflecting	3. Reflecting feelings, experiences, or content that has been heard or perceived through cues
4. Interpreting	4. Offering a tentative interpretation about the other's feelings, desires, or meanings
5. Summarizing, synthesizing	5. Bringing together in some way feelings and experiences; providing a focus
6. Probing	6. Questioning in a supportive way that requests more information or that attempts to clear up confusions
7. Giving feedback	7. Sharing perceptions of the other's ideas or feelings; disclosing relevant personal information
8. Supporting	8. Showing warmth and caring in one's own individual way
9. Checking perceptions	9. Finding out if interpretations and perceptions are valid and accurate
10. Being quiet	10. Giving the other time to think as well as to talk

SOURCE: Pickering, Marisue, "Communication" in EXPLORATIONS, A Journal of Research of the University of Maine, Vol. 3, No. 1, Fall 1986, pp 16-19.

These skills, like those of self-expression, can be learned, practiced, and mastered. Our society places much more attention on the spoken side of the communication equation, but if you think about who influences you, are they good talkers or good listeners?

As we come to understand ourselves and our relationships with others better, we rediscover that "communication is not just saying words; it is creating true understanding." Active listening is an important skill in that process.

## LISTENING SKILLS

> Notes to leaders who wish to place greater emphasis on active listening skills and effective self-expression:

Using the materials from The Interactive Skills Program, Dalva Hedlund and L. Bryn Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981, provides participants with background on communication skills noted in the following outline and the exercises that follow:

## 1. Communicating that we are listening:

a. Non-verbal attending: eye contact  
body language  
use of silence

verbal attending: minimal encouragers

## b. The art of questions

Open questions: how? what? could? would?

Closed questions: is? are? do? did?

Why questions: sometimes open, sometimes closed

## c. Focus--be aware that the conversation may take on a variety of focuses:

speaker focus	topic focus
other(s) focus	listener focus

## d. Reflections:

reinforce and support the speaker  
clarify the meaning of communications  
reflect factual content  
reflect feeling content  
under-reflected vs. distorted reflections  
leave reflections tentative

## e. Summary:

recapitulation for easier remembering, better understanding, showing relationship of main points: beginning discussion (remembering where we left off) summarizing in mid-discussion, drawing together main points, ending a discussion, a sense of what happened

## 2. Summary of effective self-expression

## a. Sharing information--the basis for expression:

Information:  
from other sources  
from our experiences

based on our beliefs  
based on our feelings  
based on our wants

- b. Using first-person pronoun--making "I" statements
- c. Factual self-expression vs. feeling self-expression
- d. Keeping the focus and avoiding "topic jumps"
- e. Using past-present-future tenses in self expression
- f. Encouraging others to see themselves with clarity--  
confrontation
- g. Giving directions--achieving clarity
- h. Summarizing--its uses in self-expression
- i. Structuring purposeful interaction

#### Activities for Developing Interactive Communication Skills

Use the directions on the sheets that follow to practice some of the basic active listening skills:

- 1) Attending Skills (verbal and non-verbal)
- 2) Questions, Reflections, Summarization
- 3) Skills of Self-Expression: "1-2-3 Pattern"
- 4) Practice Session on Effective Confrontation

#### LISTENING SKILLS Minimal Encourages

The group should be divided into subgroups of three. There will be three roles in each subgroup: speaker, listener, and observer. Everyone will take each role once in this practice, so divide into your subgroup and decide who is going to take which role first.

> Directions: [??]

> Objective--The point of the practice session is to give each person the opportunity to learn how to use verbal and non-verbal minimal encouragers and become a better listener.

> To the speaker--Your task is to talk about something that is important to you: your job, your family, a decision, or a question. The practice will be more helpful if you talk about something you really care about, although role-playing is possible. You may find yourself in the midst of discussing something important when the allotted time runs out. If this happens, you could make an agreement with the person listening to carry on later, after work or during a break.

> To the listener--Your task is to practice the skills of the session: eye contact, body language, silences, and verbal minimal encouragers. Don't panic! Just concentrate on following the speaker's train of thought. Try to limit your responses to the skills discussed in this session.

> To the observer--Your task is to observe the listener's verbal and non-verbal skills. Observe and count only as many behaviors (eye contact, body posture, verbal minimal encouragers, topic jumps) as you can manage and still be relatively accurate.

> Procedure:

The first speaker will talk with the listener for three or four minutes. The listener will then discuss the listening experience with the two other members of the subgroup. (To the listener: What was comfortable? Difficult? Did you stay with the speaker?) Then the speaker will share his or her feelings about the listener's listening. (To the speaker: Did you feel listened to? Was it helpful? Did the listener have any habits you found distracting?) The observer will then share observations. This sharing process should take about three or four minutes.

Now everyone change places. Have the listener become the speaker, the speaker the observer, and the observer the listener. Go through the five minutes of talking and listening and five minutes of exchanging remarks twice more so that each person takes each role once. The entire practice session should take about 25 minutes.

When you are finished, form the large group. Your facilitator will help you share your practice experiences. How are these skills relevant to your work? Where else would they be useful? Go around the group so that participants have a chance to share at least one thing they have learned about themselves in this practice session.

Source: Interactive Skills Program: Helping Through Listening and Influencing, Hedlund and Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981.

#### LISTENING SKILLS Questions, Reflections, Summarization

Form subgroups of three and practice using question asking as a listening skills. Each member of your subgroup should take turns being the speaker, the listener (who practices the skill of questioning), and the observer.

> To the speaker: In the speaker role, we ask you to share something that is a real concern to you. Obviously, we are not asking that you share anything that is very private or that might be embarrassing. Sharing a real part of your life, however, will make this practice both interesting and useful. (And you might find it helpful to have someone carefully listen to your concern). Or, you can tell of situations that occur in work--we all have a

storehouse of work problems that give us difficulty.

The qualifier on being "real" in the practice sessions, however, is that we are here to give the listener a chance to practice interactive skills. If you, as the speaker, take all of the practice time in a monologue about yourself, the listener will not have a chance to practice listening skills. So, be sure to pause often to encourage the listener to respond, even though this may seem a bit unnatural. Try to share information that allows the speaker to practice the skill of the session--the art of questioning. If you give the complete details of your concern, for example, it may be difficult for the listener to find anything to ask questions about. Or, if your story is completely factual and does not include your personal feelings or opinions, the listener may have difficulty asking questions with a speaker focus. As the speaker in the practice session, part of your job is to help your listener practice listening skills.

> To the listener: In this session try to concentrate on asking questions, reflecting, and, at the end, summarizing even though this may seem difficult. You may use minimal encouragers occasionally, as long as your primary responses are questions. Vary your responses between open and closed questions and vary the focus of your questions (i.e., on speaker, topic, or others). By using both open and closed questions you will also see how your question and its focus can determine the course of the conversation.

> To the observer: Keep track of the listener's responses. Include the number of open and closed questions used by the listener and the focus of each question; note the use of feeling and factual reflection, and the effectiveness of the listener's summary.

> Procedure

The speaker and listener will have a conversation of three or four minutes duration. The observer can also time the conversation, gently announcing "stop" when the time is up.

After the conversation, take a few minutes: First, the listener will share thoughts about how they used questions; second, the speaker will comment on his/her experience during the conversation and the listener's use of the skill; finally, the observer will share observations and comment on the conversation.

Now trade roles and repeat the practice.

Each listener practice should take eight to ten minutes: three or four minutes for the initial conversation and three or four minutes to review it--to share the listener's and the speaker's impressions and the observer's reactions (1/2 hour).

When exchanging observations about a conversation, please give the listener accurate feedback about how he or she used the skills. If the listener is having difficulty asking open questions, reflecting, or summarizing, say so and help him/her learn how to do so better. Remember that the purpose of practice is for the listener to learn the listening skill. Feedback and suggestions from both speaker and observer are essential to the learning process.

Source: Interactive Skills Program: Helping Through Listening and Influencing, Hedlund and Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981.

LISTENING SKILLS  
Self-Expression: "1-2-3" Pattern

> Procedure

The group should be divided into sub groups of three, with three roles in each sub-group: speaker, listener, and observer.

The speaker should make a statement about something of personal concern or role play someone who is troubled and seeking information.

The listener uses active listening skills to understand what the speaker is saying and responds with factual or feeling content, and then checks to see that he/she was understood.

The observer concentrates on the person in the listener role, looking for as many self-expression skills as possible (using first person pronouns, factual vs. feeling expression, maintaining focus, use of tenses, etc.)

The first interchange should take three to four minutes, with a couple of minutes to share observation. If time permits the exercise can be repeated twice, after changing roles.

EFFECTIVE CONFRONTATION

> Procedure: The group should break into sub-groups of four or five people. Go around the group, with each person taking time speaking about some personal concern for a few minutes. The next person in line is the listener, who responds to the speaker with a confrontation. The group can then discuss the listener response-- was it a confrontation? Was it effective? What was the focus? What are some alternative confrontations which could be made? After discussing the response, the listener becomes the next speaker. Move around the circle as time permits, hopefully allowing each person to practice responding with a confrontation.

If there is time, discuss the use of confrontation as a skill of self-expression. What are the possible risks in using this skill? Where might you use this skill in your work or daily life? How could you improve your capacity for self-confrontation (not self-depreciation). What are the benefits of confronting yourself?

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