

Listen UP

How to be an Active Listener

Does information go in one ear and out the other for you? Have trouble paying attention in class? You don't need to cup your hand around your ear to be a better listener. In fact, hearing and listening are completely different things. Let's dive into some factors of **Active Listening** that could help you become a better listener and make your time in class, work meetings, or even listening to an informative podcast more effective!

LISTENING LEVEL

The brain functions many times faster than the ears. Everything that goes into the ears, from the rustling leaves on trees to the quiet hum of a computer or a person talking, is something that we **hear**. We don't always **listen** to these things however, and the majority of things we hear are not things we commit to memory for more than a couple of seconds tops. Listening means that we hear the sound, we actively think about and understand it, and we place it into our memory. What **Listening Level** are you at?

**LEVEL 1:
Tuned In**
Complete attention.
Intense concentration.

**LEVEL 2:
Tuning In & Out**
Divided attention.
Moderate or fluctuating
concentration.

**LEVEL 3:
Tuned Out**
Little to no attention.
Weak concentration.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

Physiological

Being ill, uncomfortable, hungry, thirsty, or tired can make it difficult to concentrate on any task. Make sure that you find a good seat in your class and that all of your physical needs are taken care of.

Psychological

Your state of mind can affect your concentration. If you lost someone or have a lot of stress, it can hurt your ability to focus on what's in front of you. Take the time to find a way to relieve those emotions or stress before you go to class so you can receive information correctly.

Intellectual

Sometimes, a speaker might be on a higher level of expertise than you are. Unfamiliar words or experiences can be difficult to understand if you don't have the proper background. Always preview the chapter in your textbook to make sure you have a basic understanding of the topic to happen in class to prevent yourself from getting caught up in the feeling of being in over your head.

Environmental

Distractions affect concentration and accuracy. Desk clutter, phones, and windows can draw the eye around and provide a huge distraction. Get yourself organized before classes or study sessions and put away anything you think might pull your attention away from the task at hand.

Knowledge Base

Sometimes when a new usage of a word you already know crops up, you try to cross-reference it with the definition you already know. This can cause miscommunication if you don't have the definition being used in your background. Write down words and look them up later.

Moral

Everyone has a set of values. Sometimes new information can conflict with those values, especially when it comes to opinion-laden topics. If we hear things that don't fit with our beliefs, sometimes we develop what some people call "selective listening" and completely tune out what the speaker is saying. Try to keep an open mind and understand that while you don't have to agree with everything said, you do have to respect the other person's values and beliefs.

IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING

Suspend Interruptions

- Learn how to listen. Be aware of your tendencies to not listen and take steps to prevent barriers you think you might fall for beforehand.
- Try not to interrupt the speaker. When we ask questions, we break the concentration of ourselves and those around us. Write down your questions and save them until the speaker is finished.
- Try not to evaluate what you are hearing until the other person is finished. This will prevent interruptions and refusal of information until you have all the facts.

Clarify Misunderstandings

If you need additional information or you don't understand something, write it down. You can always either ask the speaker or a peer for elaboration or consult your textbook to fill in the holes. If it was words that you did not understand, make sure that you look it up in a dictionary. If you do not own a dictionary, check at the library or online. There are also apps available for smart phones if you prefer that.

Confirm Information

If you are actively responding to someone, summarize what they've said in your own words. This shows the speaker that you were listening and allows you to commit the information to memory more effectively. It also gives the speaker an opportunity to correct the accuracy of your information if you misheard something.

Build Rapport

Actively listening and showing that you were can make the speaker feel at ease. Especially in front of a classroom, many times it can feel as though other students do not care what you are saying. This is part of what makes people nervous in group projects as well. (Imagine what your instructor must feel!) By actively listening, you build a rapport with the speaker. They see that you respect them and their words and this builds a relationship that can benefit you in the future. You may be able to get more resources, the benefit of the doubt when it comes to grades, or even references for jobs or transfers. Active listening doesn't just benefit you with information; it benefits you with a good professional relationship. Don't knock it!