

# Active Listening and Reading

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to practice active listening and reading so that you are fully attentive and present during interactions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Three A's of Active Listening

You can use **active listening** to develop your **self and social awareness skill**. Active listening isn't about staying silent the whole time someone talks— it's about listening for the info you need, watching for clues through body language, demonstrating empathy, avoiding judgment and bias, and asking the right questions so you can communicate your best in your personal and professional life.

Active listening can be broken down into three main elements:

- Attention
- Attitude
- Adjustment



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Active Listening

A communication technique in which the listener sends constant feedback to the speaker, indicating that the speaker's message has been received and understood or interpreted as intended.

#### 1a. Attention

Attention is the fundamental difference between hearing and listening. Paying attention to what a speaker is saying requires intentional effort on your part.

While reading a book, or having a discussion with an individual, you can go back and reread or ask a question to clarify a point. This is not always true when listening. Listening is of the moment, and we often only get to hear the speaker's words once.

The key then is for the listener to quickly ascertain the speaker's central premise or controlling idea. Once this is done, it becomes easier for the listener to discern what is most important. Of course, distinguishing the speaker's primary goal, the main points, and the structure of the speech are all easier when the listener is able to listen with an open mind.

## 1b. Attitude

Even if you are paying attention, you could be doing so with the wrong attitude. Telling yourself this is all a waste of time is not going to help you to listen effectively. You'll be better off determining an internal motivation to be attentive to the person speaking.

Approaching the task of listening with a positive attitude and an open-mind will make the act of listening much easier. Bad listeners make snap judgments that justify the decision to be inattentive. Yet, since you're already there, why not listen to see what you can learn?

You will always need to make up your own mind about where you stand - whether you agree or disagree with the speaker - but it is critical to do so after listening. Once you have an overall idea of the speech, determine the key points, and gauge your agreement, you can decide why it matters, how it affects you, or what you might do as a result of what you have heard.

## 1c. Adjustment

Often when we hear someone speak, we don't know in advance what she is going to be saying.

So, we need to be flexible, willing to follow a speaker along what seems like a verbal detour down a rabbit hole, until we are rewarded by the speaker reaching her final destination while the audience marvels at the creative means by which she reached her important point.

If the audience members are more intent on reacting to or anticipating what is said, they will be poor listeners indeed.

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# 2. Facilitating Active Listening and Reading



### THINK ABOUT IT

You've probably experienced the odd sensation of driving somewhere and, upon arrival, realizing that you don't remember driving. Your mind may have been filled with other issues, and you drove on autopilot. It's dangerous when you drive like that, and it creates problems in communication as well. Too often, instead of listening, we mentally rehearse what we want to say. Similarly, when we read, we are often trying to multitask and therefore cannot read with full attention. Inattentive listening or reading can cause us to miss much of what the speaker is sharing with us.

Choosing to listen or read attentively takes effort. People communicate with words, expressions, and even in silence, and your attention to them will make you a better communicator. From discussions on improving customer service to retaining customers in challenging economic times, the importance of listening comes up frequently as a success strategy.

Here are some tips to facilitate active listening and reading:

- Maintain eye contact with the speaker; if reading, keep your eyes on the page.
- Don't interrupt; if reading, don't multitask.
- Focus your attention on the message, not your internal monologue.
- Restate the message in your own words and ask if you understood correctly.
- Ask clarifying questions to communicate interest and gain insight.

When it comes to interpreting the message you have just listened to or read, consider the six W's of communication:

1. Who: Who is the person (or the people) acting or experiencing things in the message?
2. What: What happened, is happening, or will happen? What is the main event of the message?
3. When: When is the event (or events) of the message occurring, or has it already occurred?
4. Where: Where did (or will) all the actions take place?
5. Why: Why is the speaker telling you this message? What is the reason behind this communication?
6. How: How are things getting done in the message? What are the details and steps involved?

Keeping the six W's in mind will help you gather the information you need to interpret the message appropriately, or to relay the whole story when you are the one communicating the initial message.

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## 3. Overcoming Communication Obstacles

The previous tips will serve you well in daily interactions, but suppose you have an especially difficult subject to discuss, or you receive a written document delivering bad news. In a difficult situation like this, it is worth taking extra effort to create an environment and context that will facilitate positive communication.

Here are some tips that may be helpful in those circumstances:

- Set aside a special time. To have a difficult conversation or read bad news, set aside a special time when you will not be disturbed. Close the door and turn off the TV, music player, and instant messaging client.
- Don't interrupt. Keep silent while you let the other person "speak her piece." If you are reading, make an effort to understand and digest the news without mental interruptions.
- Be nonjudgmental. Receive the message without judgment or criticism. Set aside your opinions, attitudes, and beliefs.
- Be accepting. Be open to the message being communicated, realizing that acceptance does not necessarily mean you agree with what is being said.
- Take turns. Wait until it is your turn to respond, and then measure your response in proportion to the message that was delivered to you. Reciprocal turn-taking allows each person have their say.
- Acknowledge. Let the other person know that you have listened to the message or read it attentively.
- Understand. Be certain that you understand what the other person is saying. If you don't understand, ask for clarification. Restate the message in your own words.
- Keep your cool. Speak your truth without blaming. A calm tone will help prevent the conflict from escalating. Use "I" statements (e.g., "I felt concerned when I learned that my department is going to have layoffs") rather than "you" statements (e.g., "You want to get rid of some of our best people").



Check out the video below to see how all of the active listening principles and tips that we've discussed in this lesson are essential in any profession, for handling both challenging interactions and more routine communication.

Finally, recognize that mutual respect and understanding are built one conversation at a time. Trust is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Be patient and keep the channels of communication open, as a solution may develop

slowly over the course of many small interactions. It is more valuable to maintain the relationship over the long term than to "win" in an individual transaction.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that active listening is a combination of habits and behaviors that you can remember as the **three A's**. Giving a speaker your full **attention**, listening to what they have to say with a positive **attitude** and without judgment, and being willing to follow where the speaker goes by **adjusting** your expectations are all important parts of active listening.

You then learned some tips for **facilitating active listening and reading** in everyday conversation, as well as some strategies for **overcoming communication obstacles** that occur in more difficult situations, such as when bad news must be delivered.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted with permission from FlatWorld.



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