

Lesson 6.3 Active Listening Strategies

What is Active Listening?

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. In this section, we will define and explore the behaviors which are necessary to develop an active listening strategy in a variety of contexts. Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening we discussed earlier. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance critical and empathetic listening.

Improve Your Listening Skills with Active Listening



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MindToolsVideos. (2015, June 12). *Improve Your Listening Skills with Active Listening* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2z9mdX1j4A>

What else do we need to consider when we commit to listening actively in any communication context?

1. Use Active Listening to Overcome Barriers- Being an active listener starts before you actually begin receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers at work and in our personal lives. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take and when.

Online students also need to be aware of optimal "listening" and response times. For some of us, we're fresh and ready to go first thing in the morning, for others it's evenings or late at night. There is however a necessary amount of "listening" and "attention" that must be paid to classmates and instructor when taking an online course (and in particular an interpersonal communication course).



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You see the responsibilities of "dialogue" and connection through "active listening" apply to the "conversations" we carry on during traditional "in-seat" classes as well as in any online class.

As we learned earlier, the difference between speech and thought processing rate means listeners' level of attention varies while receiving a message. Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley, "A Listening Taxonomy," in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 19.

One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening, you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're sharing clear and when possible "other" focused.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become better listeners. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include *covert coaching*, *self-reinforcement*, and *covert questioning*. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 193.

- **Covert coaching** involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as "You're getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now."
- **Self-reinforcement** involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: "You're being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam."
- **Covert questioning** involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: "What is the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?" "Why is my best friend really talking about this now?"

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. Students will want to spend the "extra thought time" they have while listening, focusing on thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can take that time to *resort*, *rephrase*, and *repeat* what a speaker says. When we resort, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we rephrase, we can put messages

into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we repeat, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.



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Other tools can help with concentration and memory. Mental bracketing refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 192.

This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren't related to a speaker's message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention.

Mnemonic devices can be used to help us recall information for later use. They work by imposing order and organization on what we're listening to. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 190.

Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization:

- **Acronyms.** HOMES— to help remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Rhyme.** “Righty tighty, lefty loosey”—to remember which way most light bulbs, screws, and other coupling devices turn to make them go in or out.
- **Visualization.** Imagine seeing a glass of port wine (which is red) and the red navigation light on a boat to help remember that the red light on a boat is always on

the port side, which will also help you remember that the blue light must be on the starboard side.

2. Use Active Listening When Receiving and Processing Messages- From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviors as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Communicators usually interpret a listener's eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, "That's new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it." We already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening. An occasional head nod and "uh-huh" signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of "autopilot" listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker's current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow.



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Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Communicators should share complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that nonverbal feedback will help signal that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If your nonverbal feedback does not clarify your response, you may need to follow up with paraphrased comments and questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don't let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listeners and resist the urge to take a conversational turn. Research shows that people with higher social status are more likely to interrupt others, so keep this in mind and be prepared for it if you are speaking to a high-status person, or try to resist it if you are the high-status person in an interaction. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 197.

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn't always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn't normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the

information. For example, many people don't think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or teacher. Many instructors invite students to take notes during informal meetings because they may not think about it or possibly consider it inappropriate. But many people would rather someone jot down notes instead of having to respond to follow-up questions on information that was already clearly conveyed. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like "Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important."

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods; verbal back-channel cues such as "OK," "hum," or "oh"; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 207.

3. Use Active Listening When Empathizing with Others- A prominent scholar of empathetic listening describes it this way: "Empathetic listening is to be respectful of the dignity of others. Empathetic listening is a caring, a love of the wisdom to be found in others whoever they may be." Tom Bruneau, "Empathy and Listening," in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 194.

This quote conveys that empathetic listening is more philosophical than the other types of listening. It requires that we are open to subjectivity and that we engage in it because we genuinely see it as worthwhile.



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Combining active and empathetic listening leads to active-empathetic listening. During active-empathetic listening, a listener becomes actively and emotionally involved in an interaction in such a way that it is conscious on the part of both communicators.

Graham D. Bodie, “The Active-Empathetic Listening Scale (AELS): Conceptualization and Evidence of Validity within the Interpersonal Domain,” *Communication Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2011): 278.

To be a better empathetic listener, we need to suspend or at least attempt to suppress our judgment of the other person or their message so we can fully attend to both.

Paraphrasing is an important part of empathetic listening because it helps us put the other person’s words into our frame of experience without making it about us. In addition, speaking the words of someone else in our own way can help evoke within us the feeling that the other person felt while saying them. Graham D. Bodie, “The Active-Empathetic Listening Scale (AELS): Conceptualization and Evidence of Validity within the Interpersonal Domain,” *Communication Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2011): 278.

Active-empathetic listening is more than echoing back verbal messages. We can also engage in mirroring, which refers to a listener’s replication of the nonverbal signals of the communicator. Tom Bruneau, “Empathy and Listening,” in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 188.

Paraphrasing and questioning are useful techniques for empathetic listening because they allow us to respond to the person we're communicating with by not taking “the

floor,” or the attention, away for long.

Specifically, questions that ask for elaboration act as “verbal door openers,” and inviting someone to share more and then validating what they say through active listening cues can help a person feel “listened to.” Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 205.

Paraphrasing and asking questions are also useful when we feel tempted to share our own stories and experiences rather than maintaining our listening role. These questions aren’t intended to solicit more information, so we can guide or direct the communicator toward a specific course of action.

Although it is easier for us to slip into an advisory mode— saying things like “Well if I were you, I would...” —we have to resist the temptation to give unsolicited advice.



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Empathetic listening can be worthwhile, but it also brings challenges. In terms of costs, empathetic listening can use up time and effort. Since this type of listening can’t be contained within a proscribed time frame, it may be especially difficult for time-oriented listeners. Tom Bruneau, “Empathy and Listening,” in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 195.

Empathetic listening can also be a test of our endurance, as its orientation toward and focus on supporting the other requires the processing and integration of much verbal

and nonverbal information. Because of this potential strain, it's important to know your limits as an empathetic listener.

While listening can be therapeutic, it is not appropriate for people without training and preparation to try to serve as a therapist. Some people have chronic issues that necessitate professional listening for the purposes of evaluation, diagnosis, and therapy. Lending an ear is different from diagnosing and treating it.

If you have a friend who is exhibiting signs of a more serious issue that needs attention, listen to the extent that you feel comfortable and then be prepared to provide referrals to other resources that have the training to help. To face these challenges, good empathetic listeners typically have a generally positive self-concept and self-esteem, are nonverbally sensitive and expressive and are comfortable with embracing another person's subjectivity and refraining from too much analytical thought.

In Summary

- Active listening is the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices and is characterized by mentally preparing yourself to listen, working to maintain focus on concentration, using appropriate verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues to signal attentiveness, and engaging in strategies like note taking and mentally reorganizing information to help with recall.
- In order to practice empathetic listening skills, we must be able to support others' subjective experiences; temporarily set aside our own needs to focus on the other person; encourage elaboration through active listening and questioning; avoid the temptation to tell our own stories, and/or give advice; effectively mirror the nonverbal communication of others, and acknowledge our limits as empathetic listeners.