

Active Listening

Writing Centre Learning Guide

At university, active listening during lecture and tutorial sessions is an important skill that you will need to improve and/or develop. Often when people talk to each other, they are only half-listening. Active listening is, however, a way of paying attention and responding to others, thereby improving mutual understanding.

Introduction

While listening is an integral part of effective communication, few students are taught how to listen effectively. Many students believe that hearing what is said is the same as listening to what is said. In reality, they are distinctly different.

'Hearing' is a physical yet passive act involving the process and function of perceiving sound. 'Listening' is hearing the sounds with deliberate intention. Therefore, unlike hearing, listening is a skill that improves through conscious effort and practice.

Benefits of active listening

Expressing your thoughts, feelings and opinions clearly and effectively is part of the communication process. Such expression is complemented by actively listening to and understanding the messages others are trying to get across to you. Indeed, good communication and understanding are made possible by active listening.

The way to improve your active listening skills is through practice. You should not allow yourself to become distracted by things that may be going on around you. Try to make a conscious effort to hear not only the words, but to truly hear what the other person is saying.

Genuine active listening will:

- Encourage the speaker to keep talking
- Indicate that you are following the conversation
- Set a comfortable tone
- Signal to the speaker that you are attentive and interested.

Although you may not necessarily agree with others, you should come to appreciate the many experiences and perspectives that people can share. Importantly, if a misunderstanding has occurred, active listening will enable communication to be clarified before any further confusion arises.

To help you improve your skills, implementation of some active listening strategies will help you to reduce the potential for stress and tension, elicit greater openness, and build rapport with your lecturers, tutors and fellow students.

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Five key elements of active listening

The key elements of active listening listed below will help you listen to the other person and increase the likelihood that the other person knows you are listening to them.

(1) Pay attention

- Ensure you face the speaker
- Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge their message
- Don't look at your watch, phone, other people or activities in or beyond the room
- Refrain from side conversations (even if they are whispered).

(2) Show that you are listening

- Be aware of your body language—crossed arms can make you seem closed or negative
- Encourage the speaker to continue by 'short' verbal comments
- Ensure your posture and demeanour are open and inviting
- Offer some facial expressions, such as a nod or a smile.

(3) Provide feedback

- Ask related and relevant questions
- Reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing
- Seek clarification
- Summarise the speaker's comments.

(4) Respond appropriately

- Assert your opinion(s) respectfully
- Avoid attacking the speaker verbally or otherwise putting them down
- Avoid interrupting the speaker unnecessarily
- Respond openly and honestly, with an appropriate tone of voice
- Treat the other person as you would want to be treated.

(5) Defer judgment

- Avoid making assumptions
- Be empathic and nonjudgmental
- Consider the communication from the perspective of the speaker
- Let the presentation run its course
- Listen to the entire message before interjecting with your own comments.

Paraphrasing

In active listening, paraphrasing involves a restatement of the information given by the speaker in your own words.

The use of paraphrasing:

- Demonstrates to the speaker both that you are listening to them and actually understanding what they are saying
- Enables you to ensure that your interpretation and/or understanding of the ideas is correct
- Enables other people to check that they have also understood the ideas presented.

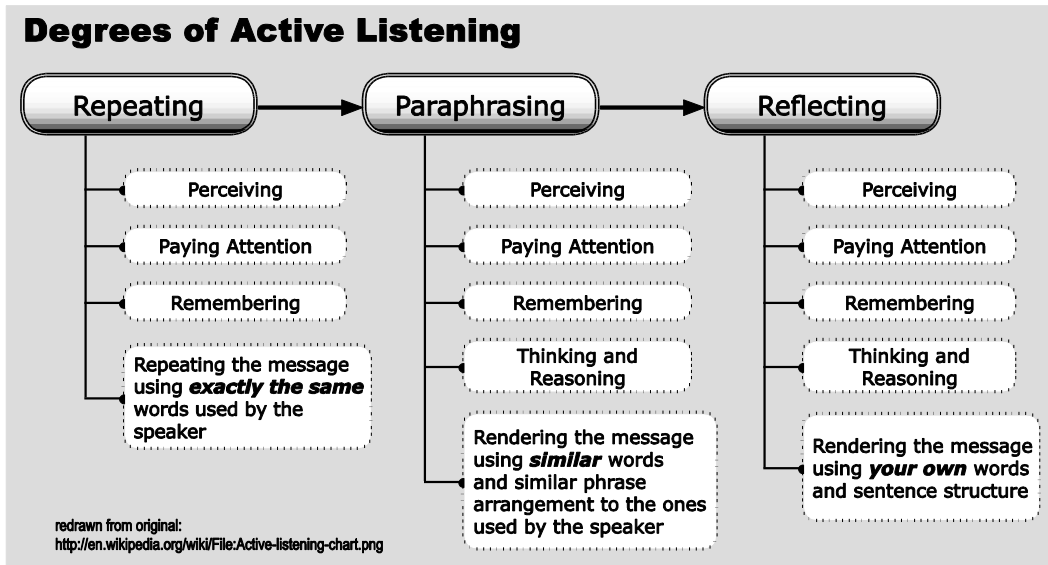
Examples of paraphrasing statements include:

- *I'm not sure I'm with you but...*
- *If I'm hearing you correctly...*
- *It appears to you...*
- *Listening to you it seems as if...*
- *So, as you see it...*
- *The thing you feel is most important is...*
- *To me it's almost like you're saying...*

***They may forget what you said,
but they will never forget how
you made them feel.***

***~ Carl W Buechner
(philosopher)***

Paraphrasing is one of 3 degrees of active listening:



Open-Ended Questions

In active listening, open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with 'YES' or 'NO'. These questions encourage the speaker to provide more information. The use of open-ended questions:

- Encourages the speaker to expand on the subject in a more comprehensive way
- Lets the speaker know that their ideas matter to you
- Relaxes the people around you.

Examples of open-ended questions include:

- *What alternatives have you thought about... ?*
- *What do you mean by... ?*
- *What could some of the consequences be... ?*
- *What other possibilities are there... ?*
- *What were the considerations that led up to this... ?*
- *Why is this element the most important aspect?*
- *Where might this rule not necessarily hold true?*
- *How else could this situation be explained?*

I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.

~ Ernest Hemingway

Nonverbal gestures

In many ways, active listening is characterised more by what is not done, than what is done. Beyond the words, there will be a host of clues as to what the speaker or listener is communicating. You should avoid sending out negative nonverbal gestures, because if you are too immersed in yourself, others will feel you are uninterested, disrespectful and/or rude.

Examples of inappropriate nonverbal gestures include:

- Entering the room/situation late without an apology or valid reason
- Fidgeting or making distracting physical movements
- Multitasking, e.g. checking sms messages
- Yawning, looking around the room or off into the distance.

Daydreaming

Certainly, daydreaming is a common listening problem, when the subject matter is not immediately engaging for you or something said by the speaker might set off a chain of thoughts in your mind not relevant to the speaker's focus. When you do switch back to listening to the speaker once more, it is likely that you will not really remember what the speaker has been saying. Normally, our minds work more quickly than a speaker can speak, so we do have mental capacity to spare. Make sure you use that spare capacity in active listening strategies, to stay focussed in lectures and tutorials, so that you can capture the whole communication and avoid gaps in your learning.

Useful resources

Other Writing Centre learning guides that may provide additional advice to help you to develop active listening skills include Participating in Tutorials and Group Work. For free access to the guides, refer to the website:

http://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/learning_guides/

Printable

http://services.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/475009/Active_learning_Update_051112.pdf

http://www.ewu.edu/groups/studentlife/Active_Listeners%20.pdf

Reference

Wikipedia (2010), Active listening chart, accessed 16 June 2014.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Active-listening-chart.png>