

A GUIDE TO LISTENING



ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTER

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LISTENING

Why Listening Effectively Is Important

If you are like most people, you spend about 45% of your communication time listening, about 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. We spend more time listening than in any other communication activity.

Most verbal communication (listening and speaking) is relatively unstructured. Its intent is to establish good relationships and to plan and accomplish activities. Classroom listening is different. Instructors prepare rather formal talks far different from the informal talks we spend 75% of our time listening to and delivering.

Lectures provide instructors with communication opportunities that lie beyond textbook material. The following list identifies common goals for presenting information through lectures.

Reasons for Lecturing

- Stimulate interest. Instructors prepare material to catch your attention and stimulate curiosity.
- Emphasize important points.
- Share information not found in your textbook.
- Present information that represents other points of view.
- Add examples and explanations to clarify textbook material.
- Communicate information in a way that allows for presenting a lot of material rapidly and efficiently.
- Pace learning to fit the needs of the particular class.
- See how students respond and adjust explanation to clarify material to confused or frustrated students.

The Speaker

The average lecturer will deliver information at the rate of 125 words per minute. Since the average reading rate is 250 words per minute, the material is being delivered at half your accustomed speed of processing verbal information. The slower rate provides you with the opportunity to take notes and think about the concepts as they are being discussed.

If the lecturer speaks faster than the average rate, you may find that you become frantic trying to write. Remember to concentrate on getting down main points. Feel free to consult with other members of the class to compare notes and help each other fill in gaps.

If the lecturer speaks very slowly, you may be tempted to become disinterested and bored. Daydreaming, which causes the listener to lose track of what is going on, often occurs at these times. It is your responsibility and challenge to adjust to the speaker's style.

As students, sometimes we expect too much. It is just as easy, and certainly more comfortable, to accept the instructor's style and move forward with the task at hand. Personal disappointment and criticism are generally inefficient and block your chances of adjusting to a speaker's style.

Some students sit in class just as they sit in front of the television set, passive watchers, perhaps jotting down a note or two. This is a waste of time. Most instructors are not professional speakers or entertainers. They have been hired to share information and to work with you to develop your skills. This requires active listening on your part. Active listening requires that you not only remain alert, but that you also take thorough notes.

Most lecturers present material in an organized way. They use a pattern familiar to you because it is the same format used in your textbooks.

Main points are stated, followed by explanations, examples, and details. They use auditory clues (repetition, “giveaways”, vocal signals (rate, pitch, etc.) and visual signals (chalkboard, overhead, transparencies, etc.).

A few lecturers are disorganized. They may “jump around” from subject to subject, leaving no clear trail. In this case, you may need to rely on your textbook and classmates to assist you in filling in the gaps and organizing your notes.

Keep in mind that your instructors are human. They have “good” days and “bad” days. Some subject matter in the course will be more interesting to them than other topics. Their personalities will permeate their presentations. Some of these personalities you will like; some you won’t. Your emotional involvement should not come into play here. You will find that you really don’t have time for that.

The Material

Lectures are different from written material.

1. They tend to be repetitive, whereas textbooks do not.
2. They include digressions that stray from the strict organization of the information. This makes lectured material less remote and more intimate. Digressions often take the forms of anecdotes or personal stories from the life of the speaker. See how these apply to the concept being discussed and enjoy them.

Lectures also share many similarities with textbooks.

1. Main ideas are supported by details and examples.

2. Patterns of organization, such as simple listing, time order, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect are used.
3. Inferences need to be made when a point is not stated directly.
4. Ideas need to be put in your own words when they are lengthy or complex.

The material dictates the kind of notes you will need to take. In many classes, when facts and their support are discussed, an outline or column style of note taking will work well. In a science or math course, you may need to concentrate on copying problems and their solutions from the board. Sometimes your instructor will expect you to respond orally, giving you little time to take notes. In this case, you may only be able to write down words and meanings or a few facts missing from textbook information.

It is important for you to remain flexible and choose or devise a note taking system that corresponds to the subject matter of each course.

The Listener

The key to successful listening lies within you. It seems as though the listener just sits back and takes it all in-like listening is a passive activity. However, the opposite is true. Learning takes place through active listening-concentrating, organizing, questioning, anticipating, and note taking.

*Following are some techniques to use to improve your listening skills.

1. **Prepare before class.** Read the assignment so that you have an approximate idea of what the learning task will be.
2. **Reduce the distance** between yourself and the speaker. By sitting up front, you are physically committing yourself to listen. You will

maintain frequent eye contact with the instructor; your interest will be visible. You will have to remain alert and focused because you have positioned yourself to be.

3. **Avoid distractions.**

- a. **External distractions:** These are the easier distractions to avoid. Once aware of them, you can often remove yourself from them. For example, if you are consistently distracted by a view out of a window, you can choose to sit at another desk. If a person next to you is constantly whispering, you can tactfully explain to him or her that you cannot afford to miss hearing the speaker. Again, you can move if necessary. If you have an attention deficit, where every noise and possibly the presence of other people in the room disallow you to concentrate, make this known to your instructor. He or she cannot assist you in compensating if unaware of the problem.
- b. **Internal distractions:** For many students, these are the most difficult types of distractions to avoid. You have developed these distracters over a lifetime; they are engraved and habitual. Among them are such favorites as daydreaming, fantasizing, worrying, associating, predicting (as it relates to things outside the classroom), and physical or emotional discomfort. This is not a complete list. It will be important for you to inventory your own personal distracters. Awareness of them is the first step toward managing them.

4. **Avoiding daydreaming:** This internal distracter merits some discussion here because it is commonly a problem for most of us. The reason for this is that thinking is faster than talking. No one is capable of producing language fast enough; our minds process information at extraordinary speeds. Because of this, gaps between what is said and what is stored in the mind occur. It is these gaps that offer room for our minds to ‘play around in’. They encourage connected thinking.

There are several reasons why connected thinking occurs. Emotional involvement may cause you to be sidetracked. A word spoken during a lecture may cause you to think about an upsetting situation you are facing in your life inside or outside of school. As you obsess about this, the lecture flies by. You may tune in later. Only to discover that you do not know what is going on and may then revert to your grief.

At other times, our minds rather than our emotions lead us astray. We often hear words and begin to make mental associations. For example, if an instructor says the word “freedom”, you may begin to think about slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation. You may also visualize the American flag, mom, and apple pie. Through our experience, we can automatically connect new material to background knowledge and associate freely. This is a great human ability, but it can interfere with learning by taking us away from the present.

As humans, we have the tendency to daydream. Hopefully, knowing why it happens and when it begins can help you avoid continuing on a tangent. You will need to return quickly to the

present in order to gain vital information from your instructor. You can only do this by increasing your concentration and attention toward the moment at hand.

5. **Increase concentration:** This sounds simple, but we all know how difficult it can be. Concentration is our main weapon against daydreaming. Some of us have trained ourselves to concentrate effectively; for others it is a skill we need to develop and practice until it becomes habitual. The following discussion explores several ways you can begin to practice attending to the present.
 - a. **Recall.** Try to remember what you have learned about this topic in the past. This may be information you read in your textbook the night before, or it may be something you have studied or heard about in the more distant past. By using the “gaps” between speaking and thinking to recall this kind of material, you will be concentrating rather than daydreaming.
 - b. **Question.** As the lecturer delivers material, your mind will automatically formulate questions about things that are unclear to you. It is a good idea to write these questions down and listen for answers if answers are not forthcoming, you can ask your instructor for clarification. In this way, you are using your natural curiosity and possibly frustration to work for you in concentrating on information being presented.
 - c. **Reflect.** In order for new information to be understood and remembered, it must be incorporated with previously learned material. By reflecting on what you know that might possibly relate to what is being learned, you are allowing

yourself to assimilate new material. Whereas recalling is simply remembering facts about something, reflecting is opening your mind toward accepting a building upon those facts.

- d. **Anticipate.** By reading the chapter(s) that parallel what the instructor will be discussing, you will be able to predict what the speaker will talk about next. As you listen, you can assume that the speaker will discuss items in the same order that they were discussed in the textbook. If the speaker discusses concepts in a different order, eliminates concepts entirely, or adds extra topics, you can recognize that though your anticipations were incomplete, they aided you in the expectations for the lecture.

We are aware of everything that goes on around us, yet we attend to things selectively. In other words, we may not consciously listen to background noise (such as a vacuum cleaner, insects, people talking across the room), though subconsciously we are aware of those noises. We select which elements of our present environment we choose to hear; often those elements include what a speaker is sharing. Listening skills are built on choices. There is power in choosing to concentrate on lectured material.

6. **Correct inaudibility and confusion.** If you cannot hear what a speaker is saying, you will need to move up front (hopefully, you are already there!). If that is not possible, it is okay to tactfully ask your instructor to speak more loudly.

If you become confused about material being presented in class, be sure to get clarification during class or directly afterwards.

Often confusion about a point has far-reaching ramifications. As

other material is presented, your misunderstanding may perpetuate further confusion.

7. **Listen for ideas, not to words.** Listening to words is a special type of distraction. It is so commonly problem for students that it merits a separate discussion.

Often the tone a speaker uses creates distance from the audience. Authoritative, insincere, unsure, or snobbish tones can be particularly difficult to accept. It becomes a real challenge to the student to “get through” the manner in which the speaker communicates to the message that is being conveyed.

Choice of language can also create distance. If the speaker often uses words that you have not heard before, it may be difficult to continue listening. On the other hand, if profanity, slang, or non-standard English is frequently used, you may have an aversion toward listening.

Dialects of English and foreign accents can also present you with special listening problems. You may actually need to experience a “training” period before you can understand the speaker. Concentration coupled with the desire to clearly hear our language spoken through this lilt will train your ear. This ability will enhance your communication skills for the rest of your life.

Regardless of the barrier that a speaker’s words create, your task as a listener is to break that barrier down. This is most simply done by concentrating on the message rather than the messenger; ideas rather than the words.

8. **Keep a positive attitude.** If you are determined to “get something” out of a lecture you will. If you are convinced that

going to a class is a waste of time, it will be. You can stack up all kinds of stumbling blocks in front to the classroom door; too boring, too hard, too beneath you, too over your head, too crowded. You can just assume that this course is important and that you have chosen to learn from it.

There is something to be said for “the power of positive thinking”. You create your own adventure in life as well as the interpretation of that adventure. A positive attitude will allow you to hear it in the first place and to seek help when necessary. It will allow you to approach lectures and assignments with interest and energy.

INVENTORY OF PERSONAL DISTRACTIONS

List distracters you allow to operate in your life as a student.

1. External distracters

During lectures

While studying

2. Internal distracters

During lectures

While studying

LISTENING/NOTE TAKING SAMPLE

Using a class session from one of your courses, complete the following:

Topic of Lecture:

Date:

Course:

Preparation (What steps did you take to prepare for the lecture?):

Purpose for listening (What motive for listening did your preparation create?):

Note taking (attach class notes to this sheet).

List any unanswered questions or confusion you have about the content of the lecture.

INVENTORY OF A LECTURER'S STYLE

Choose an instructor whose style is giving you some difficulty.
Complete the following inventory to assist you in adjusting your listening and note taking to the lecturer.

1. Name of Course: _____

2. Place a check mark next to the qualities that describe the lecturer's style.

___ a. generally speaks rapidly

___ b. generally speaks slowly

___ c. generally speaks softly

___ d. generally speaks loudly

___ e. does not use chalkboard or overhead

___ f. is generally disorganized

___ g. makes statement you do not agree with

___ h. has a dialect or accent you have difficulty understanding

___ i. Uses words you do not understand

___ j. other

3. Indicate strategies you can use to compensate for your listening difficulties in this course.

INVENTORY OF THE QUALITY OF YOUR NOTES

Choose one of your courses in which you are not completely satisfied with your notes. Complete the following inventory.

1. Name of Course: _____
 2. Place a check mark next to those qualities that describe your note taking style.
 - ___ a. too brief
 - ___ b. too wordy
 - ___ c. disorganized
 - ___ d. inaccurate
 - ___ e. messy
 - ___ f. other
-
-

3. Indicate the reason(s) you believe caused the lack of quality in your notes:

4. Indicate what you can do about it.

INVENTORY ON THE QUALITY OF THE LISTENER

Choose one of your courses in which you are dissatisfied with the quality of your listening.

1. Name of Course: _____
2. Place a check mark next to the characteristics that describe your listening habits in this course.

a. let my mind wander

b. find the material confusing

c. ignore class discussions

d. attend lectures unprepared

e. misunderstand the instructor's teaching style and/or standards.

f. skip lectures

g. other

3. Indicate what steps you can take to eliminate the problems you have identified.