

Strategies to improve listening

You will improve your listening skills by the following strategies:

1. *Choose the right location to maximize your presence.* We have spent a lot of our modern lives working at tuning out all of the information that is thrust at us. Change your physical body language from that of a deflector to that of a receiver, much like a satellite dish. Sit in an alert but comfortable posture in a place that is not too hot or too cold. Don't let your mind wander or be distracted by people talking or shuffling papers near you. Sit facing the other person in a location away from phones, your computer and the TV. Turn your mobile off or leave it at your desk.
2. *Match eye contact with the speaker.* Your eyes pick up the non-verbal signals that the other person sends when they are speaking. By looking at the speaker, your eyes will also complete the eye contact that the speaker is trying to make. A speaker will work harder at sending out the information when they see a receptive audience in attendance. Of course you may need to look at your notebook to write your notes, but eye contact keeps you focused on the job at hand and keeps you involved in the discussion. Generally, match the eye contact with the other person. About 70/30% is usual but be careful about cultural variations.
3. *Frame the conversation before you start.* A good way to maintain concentration during a conversation is to suggest a topic and time limit. This can be used to bring the conversation back if it wanders.
4. *Focus on content, not delivery.* Have you ever counted the number of times a speaker clears his/her throat in a fifteen-minute period? If so, you weren't focusing on content.
5. *Acknowledge their emotion but avoid your own emotions being aroused.* React to the speaker by sending non-verbal signals. Your face should reflect the range of emotions that indicate whether you are following what the speaker has to say. By moving your face to the information, you can better concentrate on what the person is saying. If you are too emotionally involved in listening, you tend to hear what you want to hear, not what is actually being said. Try to remain objective and open-minded. The first priority is to gain an understanding of what is in the other person's mind.
6. *Treat listening as a challenging mental task.* Listening carefully is not a passive act. You need to concentrate on what is said so that you can process the information. Active listening keeps you on your toes. Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you listen. What key point is the speaker making? How does this fit with what I know from previous discussions?
7. *Use the gap between the rate of speech and your rate of thought.* You can think faster than the speaker can talk. That's one reason your mind may tend to wander. All the above suggestions will help you keep your mind occupied and focused on what being said. You can actually begin to anticipate what the speaker is going to say as a way to keep your mind from straying. Your mind does have the capacity to listen, think, write and ponder at the same time, but it does take practice.
8. *Use simple encouragers.* Use the "I see", "uh huh", "OK" words and phrases that follow and encourage your speaker's train of thought. This forces you to react to the ideas presented, rather than the person. You can then move to asking questions, instead of giving your opinion on the information being presented.