

Basics

We spend a lot of time listening. Studies indicate we spend around 70% of our time communicating, and listening is the skill we use the most: 45% (compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing). Listening effectively is essential to being a good communicator.

The academic context

Using effective listening skills will allow you not only to understand content better, but also to interact more actively with colleagues.

Key features

An important part of listening takes place before you actually start listening:

- Find out the topic and think: what do you know about this? Activating your knowledge of the topic will help you understand the new information and how it fits with what you know already.
- Predict what they are going to say. Trying to guess the information will also help you process it more effectively. This can be done before it starts, and even while you are listening.
- If there is a listening task, read the instructions carefully. Apart from helping you predict the content, it will also tell you why you are listening, and what type of strategy you need to use (see **Understand the purpose of listening**).

When listening, remember these points:

- Listening effectively requires your full attention. Don't let yourself be distracted by anything else (see **Concentrate while listening**).
- If you know you're going to listen to the extract twice, listen for the general idea the first time and to get the details the second time (see **Listen for specific details and numbers**).
- Even if you understand all the information, you might forget a lot of it before you have a chance to use it. Taking notes can be very effective to help you remember information (see **Listen to take notes**).
- Listen actively. In a conversation, for example, show the speaker you are interested by making eye contact, nodding and asking questions to check understanding. You can also rephrase what the person said (i.e. say the same thing in a different way) to check you understood and show you are paying attention.
- Use what you see to help you understand what you're listening to. For instance, in a video, what are the images telling you? In a conversation, notice the person's gestures and facial expressions.
- We often think we got the message in the middle of the listening and stop paying attention. Don't jump to conclusions: focus until the end.

Challenges / difficulties

In a discussion, we often spend too much time preparing for our turn, thinking about what to say, instead of actually paying attention to what the other person is saying. Listen carefully and then respond to what the person just said. Do you agree/disagree? Are there any other points you can add to what they said? After you have addressed what the other person said, you can add a new argument.

How can I develop this skill?

Listening effectively involves a number of strategies, and the best way to develop them is by practising with the widest range of recordings possible. Try to listen to different:

- interaction patterns (monologues, dialogues, group discussions, etc.)
- formats (news, lectures, debates, podcasts, phone calls, TV programmes, etc.)

- durations
- accents

There is plenty of material online containing all of the above. Save your favourite sites on your bookmarks tab. In addition, vary how you listen: first for the general idea, then for specific information, for example.

Learning outcome

Whether studying, working or in your personal life, effective listening will help you learn more and interact better with the people around you.

Theory to practice

1 Which of these are strategies for effective listening? Mark the sentences below Y for yes or N for no.

- | | | |
|----------|---|-------|
| a | Activate what you know about a topic before you listen. | _____ |
| b | Don't read the task before you listen: it will only confuse you. | _____ |
| c | Identify why you are listening before you start. | _____ |
| d | If possible, listen for the general idea first, then focus on details. | _____ |
| e | Focus only on what you can hear: don't be distracted by what you see. | _____ |
| f | In a conversation, use the time the other person is speaking to prepare your arguments. | _____ |
| g | If you think you have understood the message, interrupt the other person to save time. | _____ |

2 Read the argument in a class discussion. Which of the three responses below indicates effective listening?

Of course we need to prepare carefully for the presentation: it should be clear what each of us is talking about, for instance. But I don't think it's a good idea to have a script. It would sound artificial and there would be no room for improvisation.

a

I agree, it should be clear what each of us is going to say. We can actually write down exactly what we are going to say so that we don't forget anything important.

b

Chang can prepare the slides: he's really good with that kind of thing. I'll prepare the text because I know a lot about this topic. And you can do most of the talking in the presentation.

c

So, what you're saying is that we should each have roles, but not write down the exact words? That makes sense. How about using notes with the main ideas?

3 Which speaker (a, b or c):

- | | | |
|----------|--|-------|
| 1 | wasn't really listening at all and was just waiting for their turn to speak? | _____ |
| 2 | rephrased what the other person said and made a further suggestion? | _____ |
| 3 | stopped listening in the middle and got the wrong message? | _____ |

Ways to get more practice

Think of listening in two different contexts:

- Two-way, for example in conversations: there are many opportunities to practise listening skills in your daily life. Use the tips above in your interactions at school and at home.
- One-way, i.e. when you don't have to interact. You can practise predicting and making notes using online material.