

Active Listening

Listening at university is an important skill you will need to develop. Not only will it help you with your studies it will also help you in employment as well. The key to developing your listening skills is first to understand that listening is not the same as hearing. Listening is making sense of what has been said.

In order to learn from what you are hearing you will need to become an active listener. At university you will be expected to listen for a period of time without the lecturer/speaker stopping.

Before attending the seminar/lecture, think about researching and reading around the topic. Not only will this enhance your knowledge it will help you to become an active listener.

A student's view: Friends aren't conducive to listening! Sitting next to someone you're tempted to talk to about "extra-curricular" things with is not a great idea; you'd be surprised at how much you miss in the two minute chats you and your neighbour have every time the lecturer's back is turned. Wasting that time through not listening and attempt to grasp the information can be detrimental to your grades as well as your experience of that module. So, you should sit somewhere you can maximize your attention and listen.

As an active listener you will need to find ways to stop distractions, while you cannot control the learning environment, you can adapt to it. Think carefully about what it is that can distract you, then what can you do to stop these? For example, where you sit in the room, next to your friends or at the back, does this distract you in any way? If so, then think about moving so you can hear well.

Another distraction can be the speaker: try to ignore any mannerisms or habits that the speaker has. Instead, focus on both what they are saying and also non-verbal clues that they are conveying. For example, speakers will often make hand gestures to emphasise important points, or pause and repeat key words. Make sure you note down these points.

It is important to try and keep your brain engaged. These tips will help you focus your mind to the task of listening:

- Try to create a mental picture of what is being said.
- Repeat the keywords and phrases back to yourself.
- Make notes.
- Paraphrase content.
- At the end of the session summarise what you think has been said.
- If possible, ask questions to clarify.

A student's view: I also found using an old fashioned notebook, rather than a laptop or tablet, made me a better listener.

The temptation to surf Amazon is too great when you aren't particularly enthused with a topic. This, coincidentally, tends to be when we need to listen the most. Removing technology from your desk makes sure your attention can be on what the person stood in front of you is saying.

You may find yourself disagreeing or not liking what the speaker is saying, but in an academic setting you have a responsibility to listen actively so that you can challenge/critique constructively what they have to say. In a seminar context, where healthy discussion and consideration of alternative ideas are the norm, listening actively can be a particularly engaging challenge. Diverging thoughts and ideas, spontaneous emotions are all part of the active process. Do you take all this in? Do you listen actively, or are you detracting from your own capacity to learn, for example, because you don't like what someone has said, or s/he has provoked particularly powerful feelings in you? The challenge to you in listening actively is to develop increased self-awareness alongside greater intellectual understanding.

Non-verbal communication

As was mentioned earlier, non-verbal communications are also important. Non-verbal communications typically portray enriched meaning, expose emotional content in knowledge conveyance, and assist in understanding the motives, biases, and prejudices of the communicator. Is your, and your respondent's body language, open and relaxed, or closed (for example, with arms folded)? Remember, to listen actively it is important to face the person who is talking to you.

A simple exercise to practise your active listening skills is to get a friend to talk for three minutes without you interrupting them. Then you can relay the conversation back to them.

A student's tip: A Dictaphone is one of the best things you can buy for your study.

No matter how hard you try, you won't be able to hear, comprehend and remember everything you need to. You could be involved in a seminar discussion and not hear all the relevant points being made. Or, you could be too absorbed with seminar resources and not even hear the lecturer. Recording each session is a method that enables you to re-listen to information and ensure you heard everything you needed too. Note that it is polite to ask permission from those being recorded.