

Understanding Effective Listening Skills

Learning Outcomes

- Realize the importance of effective listening skills
- Understand the benefits to the speaker and to the listener of practiced listening skills
- Learn proven techniques for effective listening
- Reflect on how using effective listening techniques affects communication

Duration

30 minutes to complete

Prerequisites

Completion of the AchieveWorks® Skills assessment (optional)

Materials and Preparation

Students will need:

- copies of the Listening Skills activity handouts A and B
- an Internet-enabled device to view their AchieveWorks Skills results online (optional)

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Method

Motivational Set (5 minutes)

1. Introduce the idea of listening skills. Ask the students the following questions:
 - a. What are some examples of effective listening skills?
 - b. Who is affected by effective or poor listening skills — the listener or the speaker?
 - c. What happens to groups or organizations when effective or poor listening skills are used? For example, think about the effect in situations in schools, corporations, governments, countries. Provide examples of the impact of both poor and effective listening.
2. Tell the students they will be learning some specific and proven listening skills and will be using them in the activity and over the next week.
3. Optional: If online access is available, have students review their AchieveWorks Skills results. In their report, have them focus on the Perception facet (part of the Social-Emotional skill).

RASA Listening Activity (20 minutes)

1. Go over the first listening skill, RASA, together as a class. Make sure everyone understands it. They will use this technique for the next part of the activity.

RASA is the Sanskrit word for "juice" or "essence." R-A-S-A also stands for "Receive" (pay attention to the person), "Appreciate" (make little noises like "hmm", "oh" or "OK"), "Summarize" (the word "so" is very important in communication!), and "Ask" (ask questions afterwards).

Performing RASA listening helps in the following ways:

- a. The listener will...
 - i. be more focused
 - ii. better remember what is said
 - iii. be better able to make connections between what is said and what the listener already knows
 - iv. have the opportunity to clarify any gaps or confusion in the information
- b. The speaker will...
 - i. feel more comfortable getting the visual and audio affirmations from the listener
 - ii. know better how to adjust their speech based on the feedback they receive
 - iii. be more confident that the listener understands after answering any questions or hearing the information repeated back

2. Have the class get into pairs. Give one person in each pair Listening Activity handout A and the other person Listening Activity handout B.
3. Each person in the pair should be given about five minutes to learn the information in their handout. Then they are to teach each other, one at a time, the information from their own handout. They should only need about five minutes each to teach their information. When finished, they should know the information from both handouts, having read one and been taught the other. What is key to this step is that they must use RASA listening techniques while they are in the learning role.
4. After the pairs have finished, discuss as a class how it felt to use the RASA listening skills, both from a listener's and a speaker's perspective.

Questions for Discussion (5 minutes)

- Which of the two listening approaches do you think comes more naturally to you?
- Give examples of situations where critical listening is appropriate
- Give examples of situations where listening with empathy is appropriate
- What might happen if you use a listening approach that is inappropriate for the situation?
- Even if you choose the appropriate listening approach, do the skills needed to listen well come naturally or do you need to practice them?

Variations and Extensions (optional)

1. Review the skills listed in the All Skill Facets section of the AchieveWorks Skills report. Have the students try to identify which skills might contribute to the different listening approaches in the report.
2. In a journal, have students note two instances where they use critical listening and two where they use listening with empathy. For each of the four journal entries, have them record the following:
 - The situation: is it a personal conversation, a lecture, something else?
 - What specific listening techniques were used?
 - What evidence did you notice that indicate your techniques were effective?

Handout A

Effective Listening Skills Activity

Critical listening is often used in business, journalism, and taking in information for learning and decision making. It means constantly evaluating what you are listening to, trying to retain and absorb what you think is useful and discarding what you think is not. It is a bit like weeding a garden and keeping the plants you want. It requires careful analysis and judgement.

As you can imagine, this is not a good type of listening to use when someone you care about is telling you about their day or when anyone is telling you something personal. Critical listening should be reserved for when it is appropriate for you to be the judge of what is important.

Understand Person and Context

Critical listening means understanding the whole picture, which involves more than just the content of what is said. Consider who is providing that content and try to understand why the person is saying what they are saying. Doing so will help you understand the overall message. However, be careful not to go too far and pre-judge the content based on the person — that is a form of prejudice.

Probe

When people speak, there may be much that is assumed or otherwise left out of what is said. A useful approach is to **probe**, asking questions to add useful information and help the speaker fill in gaps or clarify any confusion.

Take care to **avoid leading questions** and other ways your interaction can influence the information the other person is giving, turning it into a normal conversation rather than an assessment of another person's views.

A useful tool for probing is the [Kipling questions](#) of how, what, why, when, where and who. These can help you gain additional useful information.

Separation

An important part of listening and evaluation is in separating one thing from another. This may take more time and questions, but lets you more accurately understand differences and get to important detail.

An unskilled listener will quickly lump together what is heard and cast a singular judgment on everything at once. A more skilled listener will take a detailed approach and independently evaluate each piece of information presented.

Handout B

Effective Listening Skills Activity

Listening with empathy is nearly the opposite to critical listening. It means to listen without judgement, and instead let the speaker determine what they feel is valuable. For some listeners, this can be very difficult. It requires you to ignore your own perceptions and put yourself entirely in the other person's shoes. This is not about sympathy, or feeling sorry **for** someone. It is about trying to feel what the other person feels, whether that is happiness, frustration, anxiety, pride or any other emotion.

This type of listening is appropriate for most personal conversations and in some more public venues where the purpose is to understand different perspectives.

Remain Engaged and Do Not Interrupt or Interject

This can be especially hard for extraverts who want to contribute to the conversation. It may feel awkward to stay silent for extended periods. You may hear things that trigger a flood of thoughts that want to rush down from your brain and out of your mouth! But they must remain just thoughts. Even as thoughts, they must be contained enough so you can continue to listen without being distracted. Instead, stay focused and quiet, with body language that shows you are listening. Head nods, facial expressions, an occasional "Uh huh", or even a sincere "Wow!" or "Really?" can help keep you and the speaker remain engaged. You must maintain eye contact with the speaker. Looking at others walking by or glancing at your phone is a blatant signal of disinterest.

Listen with Your Ears, Not with Your "I"s

Empathy is about the other person. Avoid using the word "I", which brings the focus back to you. When someone is expressing trouble or a frustration, avoid responding with things like, "When I have that problem, I..." or "What I would do is..." or "You should...". These statements assume you have all the answers and bring the focus back to you. Even saying, "I understand" or "I feel bad for you" can take away from empathy. Instead, try saying, "How did that make you feel?" or "What are you going to do next?", which use "you" as the focus word in a question. By using questions, you avoid making assumptions and show interest in knowing more.

Keep Your Emotions in Check

One of the most important times for empathy can also be one of the most difficult. When someone is upset with you, it is usually because you have unintentionally caused them to experience consequences of some sort. For example, maybe you were late meeting them somewhere and they had to wait around. You may have been held up by circumstances beyond your control, but this does not alter the fact that they had to wait. This can result in an argument, because you are focused on your intentions (which were good), but they are focused on their experience (being kept waiting). To bring your worlds back together, acknowledge their experience by recognizing it. Avoid providing reasons for the delay or explaining that your intentions were good. These are really just "I" statements that do not acknowledge the other person's experience.