

Activity ➔ 40

Becoming an active listener

STUDENT HANDOUT

Active listening involves one person listening carefully to the words of another and understanding, evaluating, interpreting and summarising what they hear. It is structured, responsive and focused. Active listeners are not distracted by the development of their own thoughts and arguments, but instead concentrate fully on the ideas being presented. Active listening helps us to learn, increases knowledge and understanding, helps to avoid misunderstandings and enables us to find solutions to problems.

Find a radio talk show or an audio podcast on a topic that is of personal interest. Listen actively to the presenter for at least 20 minutes (or for the duration of the podcast if this is shorter) using the description provided above as a guide. Be aware of when you become distracted. Jot down a brief note of what has distracted you and then return to your active listening.

Once you have listened for at least 20 minutes, or the podcast has finished, try to sum up the main points. You will find this easier to do if you have listened actively and have not been distracted. If you find it difficult to summarise the main points, think about why this is the case. Were you interested in the topic? Could you hear properly? Did you understand what was being said? What distracted you from listening actively? Possible distractions can include:

- the development of your own thoughts and arguments;
- external disturbances from other people or technology;
- predicting what is going to be said or finishing sentences for the speaker;
- feeling overwhelmed or confused by the subject matter;
- drifting mind;
- boredom;
- taking notes and jotting down distractions!

This exercise helps you to think more about how you listen and raises awareness of what can distract you from listening. As you encounter other situations, such as listening to lecturers, attending seminars, interacting with peers and undertaking group work, try to improve your active listening skills so that you really hear what the other person is saying. The following tips will help:

- be prepared;
- assume a positive attitude;
- focus on the speaker;
- listen willingly;
- listen for useful, important and salient points;
- hear what is being said rather than what you expect or want to hear;
- concentrate on the message, not on the delivery;
- avoid emotional involvement;
- become aware of, and reduce, distractions (personal or external);
- don't jump to conclusions;
- defer judgement;
- ask questions to clarify;
- probe for further information;
- summarise what has been said;
- review notes;
- practise as much as possible: it takes time to become a good active listener.

Learning outcome: By the end of this activity you will have an increased understanding and awareness of what is meant by active listening, which will help you to develop and use these skills as your course progresses and in life in general.