

CHAPTER 3

Listening skills and getting the most from lectures and lecturers

On a Masters course the majority of your learning normally comes from reading – this is why in some places they call it reading for a degree. However, lectures, seminars and group work are a key part of your academic life, and being able to listen in these sessions is a really important skill, and one that we all need to work on – we spend a lot of time only half-listening to each other. We all like to think we are good listeners – bad news though, we aren't. The problem is that most of us think that hearing what is said is the same as listening to what is being said. However, they are very different, hearing is the physical act, the bit that makes the eardrum move, so you know sounds are coming your way, but is is very passive, you can do this in your sleep. Listening on the other hand (ear?) is hearing the sounds with deliberate intention, and that is what we really need when undertaking listening for learning, and becoming an active listener enables you to respond and remember what is being said. So, while you might think that you are a good listener, chances are you could be better. And what's more, knowing how to listen can help you pick up information about what might be in an exam, what your professor wants you to write, or even just a snippet of information to help you get by in your studies or to find opportunities outside the classroom.

Active and focused listening

Communication is sometimes referred to as being a two-way street, and so you will need to be able to look both ways before stepping into it. In the next chapter we will look at how you can contribute to conversations, by expressing your thoughts, feelings and opinions clearly and effectively, but first, let's look in the other direction and explore some ways of listening that will help you get

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the most from those around you, bearing in mind the words of professor of linguistics, Deborah Tannen.



The biggest mistake is believing there is one right way to listen, to talk, to have a conversation – or a relationship.

DEBORAH TANNEN

The good news is you can improve your listening skills through practice, and it gets much easier with time. The key to focused listening is simple, don't get distracted! And then make a real effort not just to hear what the person is saying, but to listen to what their message is. This will make them want to keep talking, will show them you are following what is happening, and that you are interested (which is something you should be doing, even if you aren't that interested). You don't have to agree with everything they say, in fact at university you will listen to lots of things you disagree with, but you should appreciate the experiences and perspectives of the people you are working with – be they classmates or lecturers. Active listening goes a step further, and enables you to clarify what is happening and which ideas are being shared. This will help you avoid mistakes like submitting on the wrong day, or worse on the wrong topic, just because you misheard something. This is of course not just a skill that is useful in class, but is also hugely important in all aspects of life.

In order to do really good focused listening you must pay attention, give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. You can do this by, looking at the speaker directly (but don't stare creepily, else you will put them off) and by putting aside distracting thoughts – this includes switching off your phone, a vibration in the pocket often sends our minds wandering. Before you arrive into the conversation too, don't already mentally prepare a rebuttal, instead be open to the ideas, even if you disagree. It is also important that the speaker also knows that you are listening, so show them that you're listening! You can also use body language and gestures to show you are paying attention, things like nodding occasionally help, but also smile and use other facial expressions, and keep your posture open (no folded arms!). Encourage the speaker to continue with small comments like 'yes', and 'uh huh'. You can

also build on this further, and become a more active listener, by providing feedback. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said, so clarify ideas using phrases like, ‘what I’m hearing is,’ and ‘sounds like you are saying,’ are great ways to reflect back.



Figure 3.1: Appreciative listening phrases.

Ask questions to clarify certain points, ‘what do you mean when you say’; ‘is this what you mean?’ As you are doing this though you should also avoid making quick judgments – interrupting is a waste of time because it frustrates the speaker and stops you from fully understanding their message. So, let the speaker finish each point before asking questions. When they have finished speaking then you can respond. Active listening is about respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or putting them down. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be honest, but also assert your opinions respectfully. A simple rule, for all life perhaps, is to treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.

Julian Treasure (2017), author of *How to be Heard*, and a number of other books, came up with his own way of being an appreciative listener, something

that he called RASA. In Sanskrit the word means ‘juice, essence or taste’ or something that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience, but that cannot be described. That sounds like the kind of thing we need. Let’s see how it helps us think about listening to people when they are presenting complex or challenging ideas:

- R**ecieve Use your active listening to ensure you carefully take-in without interrupting what the speaker is saying.
- A**ppreciate Before making a judgement, thank the speaker for their comments. A simple ‘that’s interesting’ for example.
- S**ummarise Then check you have fully understood by summarizing the information back to the speaker.
- A**sk Now you are in a position to ask questions. You shouldn’t be afraid to ask, but you should appreciate the words first.

Figure 3.2: RASA.

You can watch Julian Treasure’s TED Talk about RASA online for free:

http://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_5_ways_to_listen_better

Nonverbal gestures

Beyond our words and comments, nonverbal gestures are also hugely important in focused listening. In many ways, listening is characterized more by what is not done, than what is done. There are lots of clues as to what the speaker or listener is communicating, and not just words, so you need to try and spot these too. Your tutors will be giving all kinds of signs to you as they speak – some they know they are doing, others they don’t – but learning to read these could give you some good insights. Look for waving arms, some lecturers



Figure 3.3: Look out for the subtle signals your lecturers give through non-verbal gestures

gesticulate all the time and look like they are trying to land an aircraft, but they all tend to make quite sharp hand actions when they are saying key things, so watch for those.

Key ideas are often followed by a longer pause in speaking, and if you are lucky, some repetition. They might even be a bit louder. Professors are often accused of being mumblers – so listen for the moments of real clarity, these are the bits they really want you to know. Lecturers will also often walk towards the front of the stage or room when making key points, so look for that too. Don't get too hung up on these movements though, remember to listen and to note down the key points (see the next chapter), but do ensure you pay attention to phrases like 'firstly', 'importantly', and 'this is key', they aren't accidental, they are signs pointing you to the most important information – come to think of it, it is a bit like landing a plane... look for the directions!



**STUDENT
TIPS**

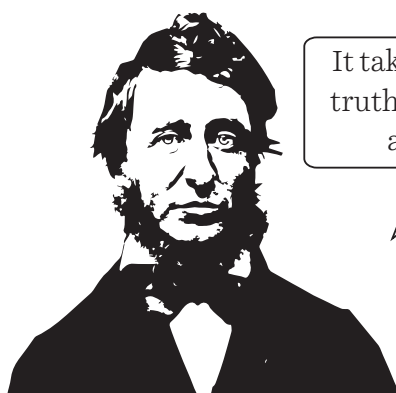
Use pen and paper when listening to lectures and taking notes, rather than typing on your computer. Writing is more effective, requires active listening and facilitates memorization. Using your computer instead can be extremely distracting (especially if you're connected to the internet) and impede active involvement in the lecture.

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You also need to think about your own non-verbal communications. You should avoid sending out negative nonverbal gestures, or others will feel you are uninterested, disrespectful or rude. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of

potentially inappropriate nonverbal gestures, and these can change depending on the situation (or not) and culture. Some basic ones though might be; entering the room/situation late without an apology or valid reason – obviously this can be tricky in a large lecture theatre, and shouting sorry across a full auditorium might be worse than being late, so instead send an email later. Avoid fidgeting or making distracting physical movements, or yawning, looking around the room or off into the distance. Also, and this one seems obvious, but often happens, avoid multitasking, (e.g. checking your phone), none of us are as good at multitasking as we think we are, and most things will wait until after we have finished listening.

As we can see, listening is a hugely important skill at university, and in life generally. It is well worth taking some time to practice this skill and ensure that you have it mastered. Some conscious effort in class and meetings will make a world of difference, after all as essayist Henry David Thoreau reminds us:



It takes two to speak the truth – one to speak and another to hear

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

This is something he probably didn't get much chance to practise during his two years in the woods of Massachusetts – but good academic advice!

As we said right at the start, Media and Communications is all about people, good communication and an ability to listen are essential both in class, and when you head out into the workplace. So, worth practicing your active listening skills – you can always make them better!

Reference

Treasure, J. (2017) *How to be heard: Secrets for powerful speaking and listening*. Coral Gables, FL: Mango.