
Assessing Your Listening Skills

To assess how well you listen to others, rate yourself on the following behaviors.

Use a five-point scale:

1 ALMOST NEVER	2 RARELY	3 SOMETIMES	4 OFTEN	5 ALMOST ALWAYS
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When I listen to others:

1. ___ I sit behind my desk, accept phone calls, read email, or otherwise communicate that I am not fully attentive.
2. ___ I have a hard time concentrating on what is being said.
3. ___ I am annoyed when someone slows me down.
4. ___ I think about what I want to say next rather than about what the other person is saying.
5. ___ I don't like it when someone questions my ideas or actions.
6. ___ I interrupt or show signs of impatience as I wait for the other person to finish talking.
7. ___ I suggest courses of action or solutions to problems before the other person has fully explained his or her perspective.
8. ___ I tell people not to feel the way they do.
9. ___ I sometimes sense that people seem upset after talking to me.
10. ___ I tend to talk significantly more than the other person talks.
11. ___ I make it a point to fill any silences.
12. ___ I am uncomfortable or at a loss when the other person expresses emotions.
13. ___ I have a hard time understanding what people are trying to say.
14. ___ I avoid asking questions that would encourage the other person to talk more.
15. ___ I ask questions for which I already have the answers.
16. ___ I expect yes or no answers.
17. ___ I frequently lose track of where the conversation is going.
18. ___ I have a hard time remembering what has been said when a conversation is over.
19. ___ I frequently discover that things the other person and I have agreed upon during a conversation don't get done.
20. ___ I avoid having things repeated, by the other person or myself.
21. ___ I keep my thoughts to myself.
22. ___ I keep my feelings to myself.
23. ___ I avoid sharing personal experiences.
24. ___ I try hard not to let the other person know how his or her behavior during the conversation affects me.

How to Improve Your Listening Skills

This section offers specific tips and activities to help you practice and hone your active listening skills. Look back at the Assessment that you completed on page 10. If you gave yourself a **4** or **5** on any item, find that item below. We've listed tips for addressing each one; use the margin to add ideas of your own. Then use our suggestions and your ideas to set goals and practice plans.

- 1. I sit behind my desk, accept phone calls, shuffle papers...**
 - Select a place and time that make distractions and disruptions less likely.
 - Ask others not to disturb you.
 - If you are in the middle of something important, ask the other person for a few minutes to complete your task. Then pay full attention to him or her.

- 2. I have a hard time concentrating on what is being said.**
 - Turn toward the other person, make eye contact, and remove things in front of you that may distract you.
 - With permission from the other person, take notes to help you remember important points.
 - If a session gets long, suggest a breather.

- 3. I am annoyed when someone slows me down.**
 - Consider the potential costs of not slowing down and listening to the other person.
 - Offer the other person a specified amount of time during which you will be fully attentive. If the conversation is not finished by then, suggest another time to continue.
 - Be proactive. Make room on your calendar every day to walk around and visit with people. Let them know you want to hear their concerns, suggestions and needs.

- 4. I think about what I want to say next...**
 - Set a goal of being able to repeat the last sentence the other person has said.
 - Allow yourself time to formulate your response after the other person finishes speaking.
 - Remind yourself that your primary goal as a listener is to understand, not to fix.

- 5. I don't like it when someone questions my ideas or actions.**
 - Ask yourself why you think that your ideas and actions can't be improved upon.
 - Ask someone you trust to give you feedback when you come across as a know-it-all.
 - Pay attention to your body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures when you're questioned.

6. I interrupt or show signs of impatience...

- › Focus on what is being said, not what you want to say.
- › Give the other person permission to call you on interrupting him or her.
- › Allow yourself time to formulate your response after the other person finishes speaking.

7. I give advice too soon...

- › Consider that the other person may primarily need to be heard and understood.
- › Ask open-ended questions that encourage the other person to offer ideas.
- › Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.

8. I tell people not to feel the way they do.

- › Feelings are real for the people experiencing them. Don't expect people not to have them.
- › Acknowledge the other person's feelings and include them in your interpretation of what's going on.
- › Ask the other person to describe how his or her feelings affect work and relationships.

9. I sense that people seem upset after talking to me.

- › Summarize the key points you heard the other person make. Ask whether that was what he or she was trying to communicate.
- › Ask someone you trust to observe you during conversations with others and give you feedback.
- › List two or three things that you may have done to contribute to the other person's reaction. At an opportune time, check them out with him or her.

10. I tend to talk significantly more than the other person talks.

- › Apply the 80:20 rule. Do 80 percent of the listening and 20 percent of the talking.
- › Periodically paraphrase what you have heard the other person say: *"Let me see whether I heard you correctly..."*
- › Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.

11. I make it a point to fill any silences.

- › Ask yourself why you're uncomfortable with silence. Extroverted preferences? Desire to appear decisive?
- › Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.
- › Admit your discomfort with silence to the other person: *"I feel the urge to respond immediately, but I want to hear as much as possible from you."*

12. I am uncomfortable...when the other person expresses emotions.

- › Remember that emotions can provide important data. They can tell you what's behind the spoken words.
- › Pay attention to the tone of voice, body language, and the use of specific words.
- › Name the emotions as you notice them: *"You seem worried about...Tell me more about it."*

13. I have a hard time understanding what people are trying to say.

- › Use open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions.
- › Ask people to give you the essence of what they're trying to say. Repeat what you hear, and invite corrections and additions.
- › If others are present, ask someone else to state what he or she heard.

14. I avoid asking any questions that would encourage...

- › Be clear about why you are having a conversation. Almost any valid reason requires you to ask questions and allow the other person to talk.
- › You might ask a person who tends to be long-winded to list the topics he or she wants to discuss and give you the list in advance.
- › Suggest a time and place for the conversation where you can be relaxed and unhurried.

15. I ask questions for which I already have the answers.

- › Avoid doing this. Such an approach isn't appropriate for active listening.
- › Consider that doing this may make the other person feel manipulated.
- › If you have a possible answer, offer it and encourage the other person to reflect on its potential strengths and shortcomings.

16. I expect yes or no answers.

- › Remind yourself that such an expectation is not appropriate for active listening.
- › Your goal is for the speaker to open up and share their point of view.
- › Invite a response by asking relevant open-ended questions.