

“A good listener tries to understand thoroughly what the other person is saying. In the end he may disagree sharply, but before he disagrees, he wants to know exactly what it is...”
Kenneth A. Wells

Listening is made up of four stages that happen instantaneously and build on one another: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and reacting. You move through these stages without being aware as they take the message from the speaker to the listener and back to the speaker.

- Stage 1: Sensing.** This is when you pick up sound waves that carry a message to you.
Stage 2: Interpreting. When you attach a meaning to the message, you are interpreting.
Stage 3: Evaluating. This is when you decide how the message compares with what you already value.
Stage 4: Reacting. When you provide feedback to the speaker through questions or comments, you are reacting to what you were listening.

Maximizing Stage 1

Problem: Distractions

Distractions can be internal, such as when you're hungry, having a headache, personal worries. Or, they can be external, such as: whispering, police sirens, excessive heat or cold, etc.

Solutions

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat enough to avoid hunger.
- Dress comfortably.
- Stay alert. Focus your attention on the lecture or presentation before it begins. Recall what you know about the topic. Review related reading assignments while you wait for the lecture to begin.
- Sit near the front of the room, and sit forward in your seat.
- Maintain eye contact with the lecturer. Eye contact improves communication: you will feel more involved and find it easier to stay interested in the lecturer.
- Put your hand near your mouth to help you listen to the message and remember it.
- Move away from people who like to talk a lot.

Maximizing Stages 2 and 3: Interpret and Evaluate

Set a purpose for listening. Often the speaker will tell the purpose of the lecture at the beginning. Write it down and focus on it. The speaker may establish connections with prior lectures, identify his or her purpose, or describe the lecture's content or organization. Look at the information under the heading, "Verbal Signposts."

Stick with the lecture. When a lecture becomes confusing, complicated or technical, it is tempting to tune out, telling yourself you'll figure it out later by reading your textbook. Resist this temptation by taking detailed notes.

Stay active by asking mental questions. "What key point is the lecturer making? How does it fit with previously discussed key points? How is the lecture organized? How will the lecturer prove the point?"

Focus on content, not delivery. It is easy to become so annoyed, upset, charmed by, or engaged with the lecturer as a person. Force yourself to focus on the message, and disregard personal characteristics such as an annoying laugh or overused expression.

Focus on ideas, not facts. Listen for ideas, trends, and patterns. If you concentrate on recording and remembering unconnected facts, you are doomed to failure. Remember, your short-term memory is extremely limited in span and capacity.

Remember that inflection, tone, repetition, and the speaker's enthusiasm are all good clues to the importance of what is being presented. Feelings by the lecturer can be expressed through emphasis by stressing certain words by the volume of their words, pitch, tone, speed, etc. Be careful to recognize the feelings, but not to agree with the emotion, or deny the speaker the feeling.

Avoid emotional involvement. If the lecture is on a controversial issue or the lecturer mentions a topic or word that has emotional meaning for you, it is easy to become emotionally involved. When this occurs, your listening can become selective. Instead stay objective and open-minded.

Stage 4: React

When the speaker is done:

- Summarize key points
- Double check your understanding
- Think about what has been said
- Point out areas of agreement before expressing disagreement
- Ask questions if you need more information.
 - Be careful so that it doesn't sound like you are interrogating the person.
 - A willingness to ask questions shows a desire to learn and is the mark of an active, analytical thinker and listener.