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How to Be a Good Listener

Active listening is hard work. Here's what to do – and not do – to be good at it.

By [Laura McMullen](#)

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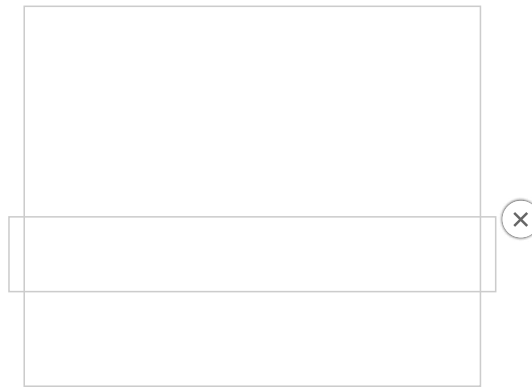
What's more frustrating than speaking without being heard? We've all been there: [confiding in a friend](#) as she paws at her phone; pitching an idea to a co-worker as he interrupts with his own; telling your mom about your day as her eyes glaze over – apparently focusing on something else much, much more interesting than you.

These situations, in the moment, can be annoying and downright hurtful. But the fact that they happen often can't be too surprising. "There's a misconception that when we hear, we listen," says Pamela Cooper, vice president of the International Listening Association, "but listening is really hard work, and it takes a great deal of concentration." No wonder our friends and family and co-workers can be lousy at it. But what about you – are you a good listener?

"Most people are very aware that other people don't listen, but they're not nearly as aware that they themselves don't listen," says Paul Donoghue, psychologist and co-author of "Are You Really Listening? Keys to Successful Communication" with Mary Siegel. So, "don't presume you're a good listener," he says.

Be brutally honest with yourself and think about your own listening (or not-listening) behavior. You may be that colleague or sibling or friend who never really listens and not even know it! See if you have any of these poor listening habits below, or better yet, thicken your skin and ask a friend.

Distracting yourself. Sending one little [text message](#) as your co-worker is talking sends an enormous message to her: You're not listening. And that hurts. Yes, perhaps you're hearing the other person, or you think you're getting the gist – you're a multitasker after all! – but are you really concentrating on what she said? Probably not. Focusing on a text message, or your Instagram feed, or that dog over there or the shopping list you need to make is telling the speaker that those things are more important than what she is saying – Next habit: interrupting!



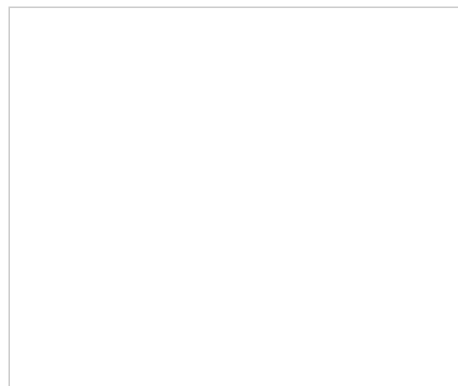
Interrupting. This bad habit is three things: Self explanatory, rude and a sign that you're not listening.

Topping the speaker's story. Imagine you're excitedly telling a friend about a Washington, D.C., vacation you're planning, when he decides to cut in: "I lived there for three years and have toured the National Mall a couple dozen times, and really prefer the Vietnam Memorial, though all the tourists typically opt for the Lincoln Memorial, which ... " There's certainly nothing wrong with engaging in a conversation, but cutting into the speaker's story to talk about yourself is a sign you weren't digesting his or her message. With this "me too" habit, as Donoghue describes it, you're pretty much saying, "You bring me the ball, and I'll take it from you and start dribbling it," he says.

Problem finding. Someone with this habit thinks, "I'm listening, but only enough to find a problem and fix it for you," Donoghue says. Sometimes this person is so skilled in the habit that he or she will find problems that aren't even there. "Oh, the trip to Washington is this month? Why would you go there in that [summer humidity](#)? And don't even think about cooling down in the air-conditioned museums, they're too crowded."

Becoming defensive. If you're the topic of discussion, you might hear [criticism that may or may not be there](#). And so we get defensive. "And when we're defending, we're not listening," Donoghue says.

Think about the last meeting, conversation or class you had. Did you display any of these habits above? Whether or not you did, know that everyone can improve his or her listening skills. And that's exactly what listening is: a monumentally important skill used in marriage, friendship, parenthood, management and just about every kind of relationship. Without listening skills, we're poor communicators, Cooper says, which is unfortunate, because she identifies communication as the "heartbeat of life." Think about the last miscommunication you had, or the last time something didn't go your way, Cooper suggests, and now think: How much of that had to do with not fully listening?



Maybe your listening skills just need a tune-up, or maybe they need an overhaul. Either way, like other skills, you need to work hard to improve your listening. "You don't just sit down and play Chopin," says Donoghue, "You have to play

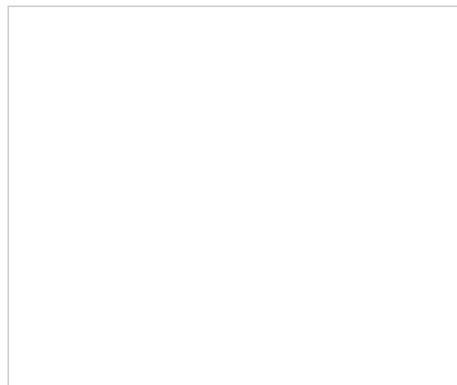
scales and practice, practice, practice."

Here's how to practice becoming a better listener:

Break those habits. Now that you're aware of poor listening habits, identify when you do them – and stop. "Even if you're mid-sentence, catch yourself. 'Here I go again, giving advice,'" Donoghue says, or, "'Here I go again, telling my story instead of listening to yours.'" If you're really motivated to become a better listener, ask your friend to call you out when you're doing these habits.

SOLER up. Cooper teaches communication studies at the University of South Carolina in Beaufort. When she notices her students aren't listening, she tells them to "SOLER up." **S**quarely face the speaker; **O**pen up your posture by uncrossing the arms; **L**ean toward the speaker; **M**ake eye contact; **B**e relaxed.

Paraphrase. Just like how good waiters repeat your order back to you, good listeners restate what they're hearing. While this repetition isn't necessary or efficient for every interaction ("I'm hearing that you think it's sunny out"), it's a useful tool for conversations in which messages could be mixed: "I'm hearing that you're upset I didn't go to your party," or "I'm hearing profits are up 4 percent, and you seem hopeful they'll continue rising."



Realize when you're not listening and fix it. No one is a perfect listener. If you find your attention has drifted and you weren't actively listening, be honest with whoever is talking. Communicate that yes, you're interested, but that you got a bit off track, so please repeat that last part.

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