

Overcoming Listening Barriers

Have you ever sat through an entire lecture and thought to yourself, “I have no idea what the instructor just said!”? Well, if you said “yes,” then you are among many college students who have felt the same way. In order to ensure that you do not experience this again, it is important to understand reasons why this occurs.

Two common listening barriers and ways to reduce them

Prejudging! Prejudging is when you automatically stop listening because you do not agree with the message being presented, how it is presented, or the person presenting it. If you do not agree with, understand, find interesting, or believe what an instructor is saying, then prejudging may be your immediate reaction to what is being presented. Here are some tips to overcome prejudgment:

1. **Listen to what is valuable to you as the student.** Although you may find the messages to be unpleasant, they may be useful to you at a later time.
2. **Remember to listen to the message not the messenger.** If you have a problem with the speaker, try to go beyond the problem and really *listen* to what is being said.
3. **Try to remove any racial, gender, social, cultural, or environmental barriers.** Remember that just because someone has different beliefs, values, and points of view than you does not mean that they are wrong. Opening your eyes and mind will inevitably allow you to learn new material.

Talking! Although we may consider ourselves good listeners, it is hard to listen when you are talking either out loud or inside your head. Do you ever find yourself talking when someone else is speaking? Here are some tips to overcome talking as a barrier to listening:

1. **Learn to appreciate the power of silence.** That’s it . . . just be quiet, listen, and reflect on your experience.
2. **Practice not talking at friendly gatherings.** Don’t be unsociable, but force yourself to be quiet for ten minutes or so, but be warned, this may be hard to do. You may be surprised at how much you *really* hear.
3. **Ask someone a question and listen for the answer.** It may sound simple, but far too often we answer our own questions without even a thought as to what the other person is saying. Asking questions and waiting for the other person to fully formulate a response will actually force you to listen.

Some tips to becoming a more active listener

- Lean forward and sit up straight instead of slouching and leaning back in your chair.
- Make eye contact with the speaker instead of looking around the room.
- Listen for what is not said instead of hearing only scattered information.
- If you have a question, write it down and ask it when the appropriate time surfaces.
- Be patient and stay focused instead of daydreaming. Try to tune out distractions.
- Keep your emotions in check instead of getting angry when you disagree with the speaker.
- Have an open mind and react to ideas instead of prejudging and reacting to the speakers themselves. Empathize don’t criticize.

Adapted from: Montgomery, R. J., Moody, P. G., & Sherfield, R. M. (1997). *Cornerstone: Building on your best*. Needham, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

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