



Listen Up! No, Really: *Listen!*

The strong, silent side of good verbal communication skills.

Oral versus Aural

A job candidate with good communication skills is gold to employers: they submit well written, typo-free cover letters and résumés; articulate their goals, accomplishments, and value concisely in interviews; and deliver clear directions, succinct reporting, and effective PR later on. Good verbal communication, however, also involves *listening*, the *other* half of the process and an equally important skill that isn't spoken of often enough. Speaking *transmits* information; listening *receives and disseminates it*. Put simply, where would a good speaker be without a captive listening audience?

The challenges of listening

Dale Carnegie, the archetypal author and guru of self-improvement and public speaking courses, wrote books about speaking AND listening, citing the importance of *both* in communication. Unfortunately, active listening does not come easily to most people. Studies show that during verbal interactions a person is often busy crafting his/her response, or thinking about a completely unrelated topic, *while* the other party is speaking. Diverting attention from gathering information can result in an incomplete message and picture of the situation, often with negative consequences. For example, don't pay attention—*i.e.*, actively listen—and you can give the interviewer the wrong answer or a rambling response that wastes time. Drifting off about tonight's concert? You missed the details for tomorrow's project deadline. Misunderstandings, miscommunications, missed opportunities, and mistakes can all arise from missing information. Plus, humans speak faster than they can listen and process, so impatience can cause people to jump to conclusions, interrupt, and create conflict.

The benefits of good listening skills

Spies and soldiers know all too well the value of listening when it comes to intel and staying alive. For most people, good listening creates and builds strong personal and professional relationships. Listening to mentors can broaden your knowledge base with useful anecdotes and better vocabulary. Listening carefully to a patient's nuanced symptoms

can mean a correct diagnosis and treatment. The modern workplace is a collaborative, dynamic, and diverse space. Investing time to listen can lead to a better understanding of others—their thinking processes, ideas, needs, and opinions. This can engender more productive interactions, help diffuse tense situations, lead to better decision making, and generate positive outcomes for everyone. Good listeners create connections. They provide great customer service, work more smoothly with teammates and bosses, and deliver on point solutions that meet or exceed a client's expectations.

Cultivating good listening skills

There are different levels of listening, *i.e.*, it's more than just being silent. Good listening requires a *desire* to understand; an open mind—meaning putting aside differences, biases, and prejudices; and tuning out the noises in your head so that you can *focus* on the message. Not just for job seekers and professionals, active listening also employs good body language: leaning forward, maintaining eye contact, nodding, and verbal cues of assent. Be sure to turn off devices to create a space free of distractions, resist the urge to hijack the conversation, jot down notes to avoid interrupting, and rephrase the other person's words at the end of the delivery to confirm that you have understood their points. Also, listen with your *eyes*—is the speaker's body language consistent with their words, or are they sending mixed messages and questionable content? By listening fully, asking thoughtful questions, and offering helpful suggestions, you can improve your job candidacy, broaden your manager's perspective, or help a colleague who thinks out loud to better formulate his/her thoughts for greater clarity.

Humans have two ears and only one mouth. When it comes to career success, use the first two wisely and you'll be less likely to get into trouble with the latter.



i n a nutshell:

“Can you hear me now?” is not the same as “Are you listening?” Good listening skills:

- **Require time, mindfulness, discipline, patience, and practice to achieve**
- **Allow you to see the bigger picture, understand situations, and respond appropriately**
- **Enable you to learn more and offer more, enhancing your self-esteem and value**
- **Make for good leaders and better relationships**
- **Create a safe environment, make others feel valued, and help earn their trust**
- **Help you and others grow**

In the end, people want to feel heard. Put your listening skills to work to everyone's benefit and you'll make it clear that it's *not* all about *you*.