

# A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING, ACTIVE READING, ASKING QUESTIONS, AND SUCCESSFUL TUTORIAL PARTICIPATION

Social Science 1185.09

Course Director: Professor Linda Briskin

## EFFECTIVE LISTENING

“If you are at all typical, *listening takes up more of your waking hours than any other activity*. A study of persons of varied occupational backgrounds showed that 70% of their waking moments were spent in communication. And of that time, writing took 9%, reading absorbed 16%, talking accounted for 30%, and listening occupied 45% ... It is important to listen effectively because of the sheer amount of it that you do each day.”

Bolton, R. (1979). *People skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

“Listening is the most frequently used communication form at all levels of education and the most central to student learning success” (Coakley and Wolvin, 1991). In fact, a study found that workers who listen well are promoted more often than those who do not.

Listening is more than hearing. Active listening is directly tied to effective communication, lecture note-taking, and tutorial participation. Most of us do not listen very well. Research indicates that the average person retains about 50% of the main content of a ten minute speech immediately after listening to it. After 48 hours, the retention drops to about 25% of the original content. So a conservative estimate is that most of us only retain about 25% of what we hear.

Since we retain such a small proportion of what we hear in a lecture, active note taking is critical. For more information, see *Note Taking at University* and *Note Taking Tip Sheet*

<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/skillbuilding/notetaking.html>

[http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/notes\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/notes_brochure.pdf)

### BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

- Daydreaming, doing other work, chatting with your neighbour, etc.
- Listening only for facts, not ideas.
- Only taking note of what is written on blackboard or overhead.
- Trying to write down everything the speaker says.
- Resisting difficult or challenging material.
- Mentally arguing with the speaker.
- Making up your mind about what is being said before carefully listening and understanding the speaker.
- Preferring to talk rather than to listen.
- Indifference or lack of interest in message content.
- Negative reactions to the speaker's appearance or delivery.

(Partially adapted from Aamodt, 1991; Costley & Todd, 1991; and Steil, 1980)

*"We were given two ears but only one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking."*

### **The Three Basic Listening Modes**

1. **Competitive or Combative Listening** happens when we are more interested in promoting our own point of view than in understanding or exploring someone else's view. We either listen for openings to take the floor, or for flaws or weak points we can attack. As we pretend to pay attention we are impatiently waiting for an opening, or internally formulating our rebuttal and planning our devastating comeback that will destroy their argument and make us the victor.
2. **In Passive or Attentive Listening** we are genuinely interested in hearing and understanding the other person's point of view. We are attentive and passively listen. We assume that we heard and understand correctly but stay passive and do not verify it.
3. **Active or Reflective Listening** is the single most useful and important listening skill. In active listening, we are also genuinely interested in understanding what the other person is thinking, feeling, wanting or what the message means, and we are active in checking out our understanding before we respond with our own new message. We restate or paraphrase our understanding of their message and reflect it back to the sender for verification. This verification or feedback process is what distinguishes active listening and makes it effective.

From <<http://www.drnadig.com/listening.htm>>

Research has identified a number of important determinants of successful listening.

### **STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING**

- Desire to become a better listener.
- Stop talking.
- Eliminate distractions.
- Look at the speaker.
- Control your emotions — think rather than feel, respond rather than react.
- Look for important insights, main points, key arguments and concepts.
- Look for cues from the speaker, like repetition.
- Listen for what is not said.
- Avoid hasty judgments. Be willing to learn and to change your point of view.
- Look for areas of agreement as well as areas of criticism
- Make connections to what you already know. Relate to personal experience and interests.
- Be patient.
- Be prepared — so do your assigned reading before lecture and tutorial.
- Survey and sum up what you have heard as soon as possible after lecture and tutorial. Read over your notes and fill in any gaps or missing pieces.

For more information check out the International Listening Association ([www.listen.org](http://www.listen.org)).

## ACTIVE READING

Students often read a course text from beginning to end in order to prepare for class. Much to their dismay, they probably forget much of what they have read and are not really prepared to participate in tutorial discussion. An *active* approach is necessary. This means seeking out the internal logic of a text (any written material), identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and developing a critical perspective on it. Following the suggestions in this guide will help you to develop these skills which are essential to university success.

### TIME MANAGEMENT AND READING

Most students, especially those in first year, seriously underestimate the time it takes to read and prepare course material. In fact, reading is probably the most time-consuming and important of all the activities you will undertake as a university student. Not only must you allocate sufficient time to do your reading, but also to develop the critical skills that will help you analyse what you read.

Studies show that students think they ought to be able to read a page per minute, but in fact 4-6 minutes per page is a more realistic estimate. Test yourself: for one of the course readings, estimate how long it will take you to read it. Then time yourself. The more you are aware of the time required, the better able you will be to plan effectively.

### READING THE TEXT: MAKING NOTES, HIGHLIGHTING, AND SUMMARIZING

As you proceed through a reading, you may have developed strategies to identify, mark, and summarize important information. The most popular way of marking key information is to highlight the text or underline passages that you can return to later. In general, the process of marking the text is a good one. However, some students highlight too much and too quickly. As soon as they notice something important, they begin marking. Students may not have actually read and processed the material but they assume, that once marked, they will return to it later. When students return to the material at a later date, the volume of highlighted material often overwhelms them.

A few suggestions to improve your marking strategies.

1. Start by reading the title, introductory paragraph, all headings and sub-headings, and the concluding paragraphs. This will prepare you for reading the more detailed argument and help you to understand the author's purpose.

**TIP:** If you have run out of time to complete all your readings, read the introduction, titles, headings, sub-headings, and conclusion in order to get a general sense about the text.

2. Read an entire section between headings before highlighting. In this way, you can see the development of the whole idea. You will probably find a concise re-statement of the author's argument toward the end (which will be especially helpful if you have to do an annotation).

3. Instead of underlining or highlighting across the page, make a vertical mark in the margin the length of the number of lines you want to note. This prevents interruption of your reading/thinking while still allowing you to identify that section for later consideration. Using a pencil rather than a highlighter permits changes at a later date, and also allows you to write comments and questions on the text.

4. Circle any concepts you come across. If you are unclear about the meaning of the concept, bring a query to your tutorial or your study group.

5. Use a question mark to identify any material you do not understand. Do not be stopped by your confusion. Often material at a later point will clarify.

When students have difficulties with a reading, they often think the problem is because they are unable to understand it. However, sometimes the problem is a lack of clarity or a confusion in the text itself. Learning to identify such weaknesses is key to being a successful university scholar.

6. Use a \* to mark points that provoke, challenge and/or intrigue you.

7. Using your own words in the margin to explain briefly an idea or note its importance is more effective than using the words of the author. Rephrasing ideas into your own words forces you to think the idea through and process its meaning.

This section is adapted from “Reading Skills for University”, prepared by the Counselling and Development Centre, York University. For more information, see Note Taking at University and Note Taking Tip Sheet:

<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/skillbuilding/notetaking.html>  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/notes\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/notes_brochure.pdf)

## ASKING QUESTIONS

Students often think their role is to answer questions and the role of teachers is to ask questions. This is not true. The effective student is able to ask questions, not only of the teacher but also of the text. The effective student learns to act like the teacher, always asking questions.

The ability to ask questions is a test of your understanding of the material. It depends upon careful reading and comprehension and if the question is about a lecture, upon careful listening. Asking questions depends upon your ability to pick out the most important ideas, to focus on the construction of the argument, to identify potentially weak links in the evidence, and to make associations with other knowledge that you have already learned, that is, to make comparisons between texts. Out of this question-asking process, you will develop your own point of view on the material -- a key to being a successful student and a good scholar.

### PRE-READING QUESTIONS

You can ask questions before you read a text in order to guide your reading. This will help you to focus your attention on what you are reading and, in particular, to pick out the main ideas. While you are reading, you will be looking for the answers to your questions.

Pre-reading is part of a process of previewing a text. Before you begin to read or formulate questions, look through an article, read the introduction, the headings, and the concluding paragraph.

Then you are ready to formulate pre-reading questions. These can be generated by looking over the chapter headings and subheadings (or topic sentences) before you begin reading. For example, some of the subheadings in a reading on “Beauty, Status and Aging” are:

- Brief Historical Backdrop
- Aging and Women's Differential Life Experience
- Assumptions and Presumptions about Aging Women
- Standards of Beauty
- Beauty as Youth

Without knowing anything about the content of the chapter, you could ask the following questions:

- What is the historical background for current views about beauty, status and aging?
- What is the relationship between women's life experience and their patterns of aging?
- What assumptions are made about aging women?
- What are the standards of beauty in our society?
- What is the relation between beauty and youth?

As you can see, it is not difficult to generate such questions. And they will help direct your reading.

When asking these kind of questions, it is usually a good idea to work with a small portion of the text. If you have a book to read, ask questions for each chapter or for each section of a chapter. Answers to these questions provide a framework for taking notes on the text, and also a useful mechanism to self-test later. If you cannot answer one of your pre-reading questions, bring it to your tutorial.

### **AFTER YOU READ THE TEXT**

After you read the text and have answered your pre-reading questions, you need to step back from the details of the material and make some assessments.

1. Ask yourself if you have understood the material. Are there any words, ideas, concepts or arguments in the chapter/article that you did not understand? Formulate specific questions to bring to your tutorial.

The more specific the questions you ask of your teachers and classmates, the more willing and able they will be to respond to them. For example, a student who says to a teacher, "I do not understand the chapter" will get a less positive response than a student who says, "I do not understand the argument on pp. 10-11." Why is the second question more likely to get a positive response?

2. Answer the following questions on the text:

What questions are the authors trying to answer?

What is the authors' main point/argument? Why is it important?

What is the method of data collection and analysis?

What are the key supporting details and evidence? Any weaknesses in the argument?  
Does the evidence support the conclusions?

What do the authors take-for-granted, that is, what assumptions do they make? Have they left any unanswered questions?

In what ways do you agree/disagree with the point of view, the argument, the conclusions?

How does this text compare with the other texts on the same topic? Do all authors make the same argument? What areas of disagreement? Who is more persuasive?

What have you learned? How have your views changed as a result of reading this material?

## STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sometimes teachers will develop study questions to help guide your reading and focus tutorial discussion. Unlike pre-reading questions, they are based on a prior reading of the text and so are more specific and detailed. Study questions are provided for *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (in *Skill and Assignment Kit*).

### DEGREES OF DIFFICULTY

There are various levels of study/discussion questions, each of which involves different skills and different degrees of difficulty. For each of your course readings, undertake to write a level 2/3/4 question.

Level One: Level One questions involve recognition and recall, that is, being able to locate and reproduce pieces of factual information. In general, level one questions ask, “What did the author say?” For example, “To what occupational categories do most women workers belong?” Usually there is only one right answer to this level of question. Most university assignments do not ask you Level One questions.

Level Two: Level Two questions require a greater contribution on the part of the learner than merely locating or recognizing directly stated information. Level Two questions ask, “What did the author mean?” The reader must be able to comprehend and interpret the material, not just recall it. Level Two questions ask you to identify and explain concepts and the logic of arguments. For example, “Explain the concept of the feminization of poverty.” Or “How does the author explain the increase in the number of women who are poor?”

Level Three: Level Three questions involve the learner in analyzing facts and inferences. This type of critical comprehension requires the reader to apply, analyze, and synthesize material. It may involve evaluation of the material as well as the integration of material from several sources. For example, “Evidence suggests that older women are seriously devalued in our society? Do you agree? Why or why not?” Or “Draw out the connections between the devaluation of older women and the problems that younger women face around body image.”

Level Four: Level Four questions ask the learner to utilize new information in original ways. This level of understanding requires the greatest contribution on the part of the learner. Questions of this kind could be called ‘creative comprehension questions’ or ‘complex problem solving.’ For example, “Toronto faces serious problems around the issue of racism and sexism. Use concepts from course readings to explain why these problems are occurring. Develop an action plan to address these problems.”

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND ATTITUDES

Some questions are less analytical in their focus. They may draw on personal experience and attitudes. These questions ask learners whether the arguments and presentation in the texts are consistent with their own experience and whether the readings have expanded or shifted their understanding of that experience. Other questions may ask about emotional responses to material: discomfort, anger, excitement, resistance, denial, enthusiasm etc.

## ASKING QUESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

A student who has learned the course material should be able to anticipate the questions that will be asked on tests/exams. Teachers do not design tests to trick students or on the basis of any obscure principles, but rather to test students' knowledge of the material. Since it is not possible to cover all areas, teachers will tend to ask questions about the most important material. Students who can identify and understand the most important material will also be able to predict the test questions. These anticipated questions can be the basis for your test preparation program. Self-testing is a very successful studying strategy and can help reduce test anxiety.

When you are preparing for tests/exams, you should try to find out what level of questions your teachers intend to ask. It is obvious that university tests and exams do not rely on Level One questions of recognition and recall. Thus you have to adjust your studying to prepare for the other kinds of questions. For example, memorization will only help you prepare to answer Level One questions. The other three levels of questions involve an increasing degree of understanding and creativity. For your information, exams in this course will ask short answer and essay questions that rely on Level Two, Three and Four questions. There will be no multiple choice tests.

For more information, see “Preparing for Exams at University: Tips to help you make the grade!” and “Preparing for Tests and Exams” (which also deals with multiple choice questions):

[http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/exams\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/pdfs/exams_brochure.pdf)

<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/skillbuilding/exams.html>

## SUCCESSFUL TUTORIAL PARTICIPATION

Being an *active* learner and asking questions will help you to assess course lectures, predict test questions and write university level essays. Furthermore, out of this question-asking process, you will begin to develop your own informed point of view on the material, and facilitate your participation in class discussion. Evidence shows that students learn to clarify their thinking and develop a fluency with the material by participating in such discussions.

In general, the more work students have done on the material outside of class, the more confident they are to share their thoughts and ask questions during the discussion. **Coming to each tutorial session with at least one well-formulated question or comment often helps students to participate in the discussion.**

Many students are quite passive in classroom discussions, waiting to be asked for their opinions, fearing criticism and disagreement. A smaller percentage claim too much space, talk too much and do not listen effectively. Ground rules are necessary if discussions are to be an exciting vibrant experience.

**1. Everyone is responsible for the success of the discussion:** raising and responding to points, and monitoring the sharing of time. See yourself in a leadership role (or learning to be in a leadership role) in relationship to the group process. Without your active participation and commitment, the tutorial leader cannot stimulate an effective discussion.

2. **Every question is worth asking.** Often many students have similar questions but are afraid to ask them for fear of revealing some ignorance. This approach is self-defeating: you do not have your question answered and you reinforce your fear of asking questions. Often a question triggers important levels of clarification for everyone. Remember the aphorism about wisdom being the recognition of what you do not know

3. **Disagreement and difference are the basis for new insights.** Women are often socialized to avoid disagreement for fear of hurting another's feelings. The classroom can be an arena in which we cultivate skills of interchange which are intellectually challenging and respectful rather than competitive or personally undermining. We are all responsible for making the classroom a relatively safe place for such interchange.

Briskin, 2010