

# Discriminative

In this listening type the objective is to focus on the sounds. At its most basic level this is akin to distinguishing the speaker's gender, or the number of people in a conversation. This is the most important type, because it forms the basis of the other four. People who are sensitive to the speaker's tone, rate of speech, pitch and emphasis allow you to better understand when there are differences in meaning. When considering discriminative listening there are three key parts:

1. **Ability to hear.** If you lack an ability to hear well you will have difficulty when you try to discriminate between sounds. In different people this can be more acute on specific frequencies, where they may have more trouble picking sounds from a bass voice than a highly pitched voice.
2. **An awareness of sounds.** When you're a native speaker you often recognize the sounds of vowels and consonants that may not have been said by a speaker. In English a listener may hear "this sandal" when what was actually said by the speaker was "this handle." Being attuned to the sound structure will make you a much better discriminative listener.
3. **Understanding nonverbal clues.** Often a person's words do not communicate their true feelings or emotions, which means discriminative listeners need to look at the way a speaker acts, or how the words are said to really understand the intended meaning of the speaker.

In our own language we rapidly learn to distinguish the different sounds, but it soon forms a habit which makes it very difficult to hear the different sounds in another language. This is the reason many people struggle to speak a second language perfectly, because they are unable to fully distinguish all of the subtle sounds.

## Comprehensive

The ultimate goal of comprehensive listening is to understand the message the speaker is communicating. The problem is that many people often interpret the same conversation in different ways, depending on their individual and social backgrounds. To fully comprehend what is being said requires you to hear the words, understand the body language and take it to the next step by extracting the key message from a long spiel.

This listening type is found in nearly all aspects of our life, and is one of the primary ways that we learn. In university we listen to lectures from the instructor, and what we learn is based on how well we can listen. The same applies to your work, as you listen to new procedures, instructions, briefings and reports, how well you can do your job is directly related to understanding what you're being told. If you don't listen effectively, your work will suffer.

Comprehensive listening demands that you concentrate on the message and its source, and you can work to improve your ability by focusing on these three variables.

1. **Vocabulary.** It's hard to determine the precise relationship, but having a larger vocabulary significantly increases your ability to understand what's being said. Luckily it's never too late to improve the different words you know, so make a conscious effort to learn new words and understand the unfamiliar. In a pinch you can also use the context of what's being said to help you understand a word you don't know, but this can hinder your overall understanding if you get it wrong.

2. **Concentrating.** It's difficult to stay focused when you're in a lecture that isn't exciting, or a meeting in the office that is drawn out and dancing around the point. We've all had times in our lives where we can admit that we haven't concentrated on what was being said to us. Sometimes this happens because your attention is divided, or the listener is preoccupied with something else. Sometimes the listener is simply more concerned with their own needs, and lacks the curiosity, interest and energy to stay focused. Good concentration skills require motivation and discipline.
  
3. **Memory.** Because you cannot process information without using your memory, it's critical in comprehensive listening. It helps you to establish expectations of what you'll encounter, and gives you the background and experiences to function in the world. Understanding at its simplest point is knowing the meaning behind words, concepts and ideas, so you can communicate with other people.

## Relationship

Relationship listening is a therapeutic listening type, because the ultimate goal of the listener is to be a sympathetic ear, without requiring detailed verbal responses. The best example is helping a friend talk through a problem, and is critical as a base for building strong interpersonal relationships. Being the person that's there for a friend when they need to "get things off their chest" is what can make your friendship even stronger.

Relationship listening does require you to listen to the information, the focus you need to have is on simply understanding the speaker. There are three key behaviors that help to boost your abilities in this listening type:

1. **Being present.** You need to be paying attention to the speaker. This is critical because they have a problem they want to tell you about, and you can't let your focus drift. All your focus needs to support that you're listening, and be careful because whilst you can read the speakers non-verbal behavior, they can also read yours! Make sure you are present and pay attention to the speaker. One of the best ways to do this is with eye contact, looking comfortably at the speaker helps you connect much better than a frequently shifting gaze as you look all around the room. Your body language also reinforces your attention, leaning towards the speaker with an open posture shows your interest, while leaning back with crossed arms shows a lack of it. Build on this with smiles, frowns, nodding and small phrases like "oh I see," "uh huh" and "yes" are all supportive, and using a pleasant tone of voice with a genuine concern for the other party will help your relationship immensely.
2. **Being supportive.** There are many responses that can have an adverse affect on your relationship, and you should never interrupt the speaker, change the subject or spin the conversation so you can talk about yourself. All of these prove your lack of concern for the speaker, and in many cases giving advice and attempting to influence the conversation will have an adverse effect on the relationship you're trying to build. Often the best response is to remain silent, because many speakers are simply looking for a sounding board – someone to listen while they talk through the problem they are having. To be a great relationship listener you need to know both when to talk and when to listen, and they generally listen much more than they actually talk. Aim to be discrete, show a belief in the ability of the speaker and have patience as they talk it out. Master these three and you'll make great progress as a relationship listener!

3. **Being empathetic.** This is all about feeling and thinking with the speaker. If you're truly an empathetic listener you can see the problem from the speaker's eyes and feel what they feel. If you can do this effectively, you'll form very strong relationships with your friends. Obviously the more experience you have in your life allows you a better chance to do this, as an individual who has never gone through a divorce, lost a child, or declared bankruptcy is going to have a much more difficult time relating to their friends who are going through a similar problem. The risk is that you can't be effective as an empathetic listener without getting involved, and sometimes you can learn more than you really wanted to know.

## Critical

When listeners have to evaluate a message and respond with their opinion, this is called critical listening. You need to scrutinize what is being said, and play an active role because it usually requires you to make a decision, form an opinion or solve a problem. Making a judgment requires you to assess the situation, and requires you to both listen to what's being said while analyzing it at the same time.

While practicing critical listening you need to ask yourself

- What is the speaker actually trying to say?
- How do I feel about their opinion?
- What is the main argument that is being presented?
- Does what I am hearing align or differ to my own beliefs and opinion?

Being able to listen critically is fundamental to being able to truly learn. All of the decisions we make on a daily basis have a basis (however small) in critical listening. It's important that you have an open mind and not let bias or stereotypes influence your judgment, and by doing so you'll become a much better listener. Focus on these three aspects as you perfect your critical listening skills

1. Is the speaker a credible source, who is both an expert on the subject being discussed and that I can trust to be giving honest and unbiased information?

2. Reflect on what's being said and decide for yourself if it's true. Consider the sources of information, the data used, and if it really is the right conclusion that has been drawn.
3. Think about the speaker's intent, and make sure you're not following an emotional response. Sound critical listening skills are based on logic.

## Appreciative

The final type of listening is listening for the sake of pure enjoyment. This includes music, theater, television, radio and films, where the ultimate response is the one from the listener (not the speaker). Listening appreciatively differs for everyone, and the quality of it depends on three factors.

1. **Presentation.** This includes the medium, the setting and who the speaker is. Sounds can be produced in many different ways, and their presentation is key – most of us have particular ways we like to listen.
2. **Perception.** Your expectations play a large part in your appreciation, which is based on your attitude. Everything we listen to has been selected by us, and is the core of what we listen to in the first place.
3. **Past experience.** There's many reasons why we enjoy listening to certain things, whether we're an expert in the area, have positive experiences linked to the sounds, or simply want to learn.

Being an appreciative listener is not fixed, and as you learn and discover more about yourself, you can open your mind and appreciate more of what is out there in the world and become a better appreciative listener.

Most people take listening for granted. They see it as something that just “happens” and don’t ever make an effort to develop their skills. It’s only when you stop and look into the details that you realize it’s one of the most important skills you can develop, and will have a positive impact on every other aspect of your life. Not only personally, but in your business as well.