

Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them

Appeal to all seven types of listeners to be sure everyone understands your message.

By Joe Curcillo

Before you speak, think about your audience, whether it's one person, two people, or a large group. Be aware that not everyone listens in the same way.

The Seven Listener Styles

There are seven types of listeners:

1. The Active Listener. These listeners hang on your every word. They take in your message and listen attentively. They show signs of response, either physically or verbally, such as nodding or saying, “mmm-hmm” to show they’re listening. The active listener will also be the first person to give you feedback to assure you they understand.

This is the Holy Grail audience, and it’s rare. Appreciate these listeners, and make good use of their feedback.

2. The Inactive Listener. These are the listeners who let your words flow in one ear and out the other. Commonly, they’re far away in another place daydreaming or solving other problems. Or they may be waiting to jump into the conversation and state their position without hearing yours.

Find ways to grab the attention of the inactive listener. (See “Four Ways to Connect with All Types of Listeners” below.) Use drama if necessary to redirect their focus to your message.

3. The Selective Listener. These listeners are waiting to hear what they expect – or want – to hear. They tend to hear only enough information to formulate a counter argument. Or they may filter your words until they feel they’ve achieved base comprehension.

With selective listeners, you’ll need to emphasize (1) the parts of your message they most need to hear and (2) the details that they’re most likely to filter out.

When you see people tuning out something you’ve said, try saying the same thing in another way. A vivid metaphor or story, for instance, might make your point in a way that will get through to them.

4. The Rushed Listener. Much like a selective listener, rushed listeners will listen only as far as needed to get the gist of what you’re saying. Then, they’ll transition into inactive listeners.



“Listen to your listeners.”

Use tactics similar to those for inactive and selective listeners. If there's a legitimate reason for the rushing, see if you can reschedule the talk for a more leisurely time.

5. The Scared Listener. These listeners are so fearful of being criticized or rejected that they may hear only those words and phrases they feel they must defend against. Thus, you'll be speaking to a selective listener in self-defense mode.

Again, stress the parts of your message you need these listeners to hear. Emphasize favorable and affirming words. Balance every negative statement with four positive ones, and be sure they hear the motivational, inspirational parts of your message.

6. The Thoughtful Listener. These people would be active listeners except for their overriding wish to please you. They tend to listen only for what they must do to make you happy. Your pivotal message may thus be lost to them. Treat them as selective listeners, much like scared listeners, emphasizing the pieces of information they may overlook.

7. The “Uneducated” Listener. These listeners aren't uneducated in an academic sense. They're uneducated about the topic at hand. No matter how smart or motivated they are, they can't pick up what you're saying if you use words and concepts that are unfamiliar to them.

The way to reach such listeners is to make sure they understand the terms you're using. Define anything that might be unclear. (See “Feed their heads” below.)

Four Ways to Connect with All Types of Listeners

As you prepare to communicate, size up your audience. If you're speaking to just one or two people, figure out what type of listeners they are and adjust your message and delivery accordingly. If you're speaking to a large group, every sort of listener may be included in your audience, so customize your speech to reach all listener types. To make certain that you get through to everyone, use all the tools at your disposal. Some suggestions:

1. Change your voice. Vary your vocal tone and volume to seize the attention of inactive listeners and to emphasize material that selective listeners might miss. Sometimes, rather than speaking louder in hopes of being heard, it can be more effective to speak softly, forcing people to listen more closely.

When you have something vital to say, try pausing first and letting the silence stretch out for a moment. That will make the point, “This is important. I want to be sure you hear it.” This strategy will work when speaking to all the different kinds of listeners.

2. Use body language to advantage. Change your position frequently. When speaking in a large venue, move around the room. Use gestures. Smile when your message warrants it.

If you're speaking one-on-one, look your listener in the eye. Even if it's a big group, you can use eye contact effectively. Mentally divide the group into fourths, and make eye contact with someone in each quarter, one at a time. If you notice someone whose mind seems to be wandering, hold eye contact until you regain their attention.

3. Feed their heads. Use vocabulary that everyone can understand. Always avoid jargon. If you must use technical terms, define them.

Use brief, simple sentences and short, vivid words. Simple, concrete language will appeal to all types of listeners and make your speech more engaging.

4. Give them something to remember. Create an anchor that will stick in people's minds. This anchor might be a touching story or a striking symbol. To make it even more memorable, portray it on a giant sign or banner. It's also effective to use props, holding up something that will help people visualize your example.

Weaving together all these considerations will create a tapestry that covers the full range of listeners. Take time to pay attention to your communication process, and then, listen to your listeners before you speak. You will hear volumes that allow you to communicate much more successfully. 

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Your Communication Checklist

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Face to Face (Vol. 14, No. 1)

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Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener (Vol. 37, No. 1)

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