

# Active Listening in a Digital World

**Active listening** means focusing completely on a speaker's message, not just hearing it, and it's done with more than just your ears. In a digital world, there are emails, instant messaging and social media that demand your attention. What actions can you take to be an active listener in a digital world?



## Show the sender they've been heard

Just like face-to-face communication, in a digital world it's important to show you're listening.

- Acknowledge the message in a reasonable timeframe. Don't fail to respond simply because you don't want to be forced into a hurried reaction.
- A quick message, like "I'll let you know," or "Let me think about this," is better than silence.

## Make sure you understand both message and mood

It's incredibly easy to misinterpret a digital message, as well as the sender's emotion behind it.

- To make sure you understand it, read it twice.
- If it's at the end of a communication chain—in email, text messaging or social media—scroll back to see what prompted the message.
- Check for any possible typing errors that could've changed the meaning.

## Check for understanding

The message may not be phrased in the best way, or information may be missing.

- Build rapport with the sender and let them know you recognize the intended message by checking for clarity.
- Ask questions to assess the sender's position, explore different angles, as well as get more meaningful information.

## Paraphrase and summarize

Written messages lack additional cues like tone and facial expression, so you need to confirm you interpreted the message correctly.

- Paraphrase or summarize what the sender wrote. This shows you're making an effort to see the sender's point of view while giving them an objective view of their own position.
- Use statements like, "My understanding is..." or use "you" statements, such as, "It sounds like you're saying..."

## Validate the sender's expression

Sometimes a digital message will include information a person values highly, or may not even say out loud. But without face-to-face clues, you may miss its importance.

Acknowledge the sender's position with empathy and interest. "I appreciate your bringing this up with me," for example, or simply, "You make a good point."



## Reflect the sender's emotions

Some people can be hesitant to express their feelings openly or discuss emotionally sensitive topics in writing.

- Build trust with the sender, and encourage them to express themselves fully, by reflecting what emotions you find in their message.
- Statements like, "It seems that you're concerned about this," for example, or, "I get the sense you're frustrated with the situation" can be helpful.

## Avoid barriers to ongoing dialogue

Sometimes a person sends a message because they need to be heard, to convey their current position or relate an emotion they're feeling.

Even though it's digital, it's still opening a dialogue. Avoid actions that will shut down the dialogue, such as "should" statements, reactions grounded only in emotions, or unsolicited opinions.

## Be extra careful to respond appropriately

In speaking, it's possible to soften a negative message. In writing, a negative response can come off as insensitive.

- Be extra careful in your choice of words when it's necessary to disagree, refuse, or give a conflicting point of view.
- Show respect even if you disagree.
- Consider writing your message and then setting it aside until later, when you can look at it with fresh eyes.

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