

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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