

Success Center
Directed Learning Activity

**Active
Listening**

SS004.

Directed Learning Activity – Active Listening Skills

Description: *In this Directed Learning Activity (DLA), you will develop your active listening skills by learning behaviors that will help you to not only comprehend and record the important points of a presentation, but also to remember what you have heard.*

Prior Knowledge: *You should have an understanding of annotation strategies as well as learning styles. If you do not, the Success Center recommends completing the DLAs “Reading Strategies: Marginal Annotation for Reading Across the Curriculum” and “Study Skills: Learning Styles.”*

Materials: *To complete this DLA, you will need access to a computer with an internet connection.*

Step One: Assessing Your Listening Skills

It takes a good amount of effort to become an active listener – someone who can consistently – and intentionally – force himself or herself to focus on whomever they are listening to in order to understand whatever they are listening to. Yet few students have ever received explicit instruction in listening skills; this DLA is meant to meet that need.

Before beginning, however, you should first take some time to consider and answer the following questions:

- **In general, do you find it easy or difficult to listen in the classroom? In what classes do you find yourself best able to listen?**
- **What are some distractions that prevent you from listening in class? When do you find you are least able to listen?**
- **Think about the teachers whose words you remember most. What was it about how they taught that made it easier to listen to them?**

Step Two: Pondering the Tree

There's an old Zen Buddhist *koan* (a sort of riddle used for spiritual instruction), which you may be familiar with, that goes something like this:

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

Now, when pondering this question, your first instinct may be to laugh heartily and declare loudly, "Of course it does!" But, think about this for a second; if no one is there to hear it, how can you know the falling tree makes a sound? Have you heard a tree – or anything else, for that matter – make noise when you weren't there? Of course not: you weren't there! So, can you really say with certainty that anything makes noise if you aren't there to hear it? What is sound if no one is around to hear? Isn't the existence of sound, in many ways, entirely dependent on someone being there to hear?

Among other things, this seemingly simple riddle points out the crucial role listening plays in communication. This relates directly to your experiences in the college classroom. Although, many times, instructors will use several techniques to communicate key concepts and information, there will be some element of lecture in virtually every class you will take. This being the case, it is vital to your educational success to understand how to cultivate and develop active listening skills to make use of the information your instructors are attempting to communicate to you.

Step Three: Hearing the Tree

Chances are, you have had this experience: you sit down in a class, pencil sharpened and ready, determined to hang on your instructor's every word, take the best notes, and be the greatest college student in the history of academia. As class begins, you listen attentively, scribble notes furiously, and may be so proud of yourself that images of tossing your cap high into the sky on graduation day begin to dance through your mind, along with the cheers and applause of your friends and loved ones. YOU DID IT! Soon after this, another even better daydream enters your mind; you have been hired for the perfect job! This is what you have studied and worked so hard for!

Next thing you know, you snap back into reality. You've been daydreaming. Class is half over, you don't remember a thing the instructor said, and you have to either ask a fellow classmate what has been going on the last half hour or do what many students do: fall behind and hope everything somehow works out. But it doesn't always work out. You've missed out on extremely important information, and this is not helpful. So how can you avoid daydreaming? How do you pay better attention?

Paying attention is a wildly misunderstood skill, particularly when it comes to the classroom. When someone tells you to "pay attention," the first things you perhaps think of are being quiet and not moving a muscle. No doubt this is partly due to the fact that this is what you were told in grade school, when you were bursting with energy and curiosity. And yes, in order to listen and hear, it is important that – at least for some of the time – you are silent. It's a little hard to hear what your instructor has to say if you are moving in rhythm to your favorite song. But, what many students don't understand is that a huge part of your ability to pay attention relies not only on sitting still and silently, but on *interacting* and *participating*.

With that in mind, these are some strategies and techniques to help you *pay active attention*.

- ***Take part in the conversation or discussion, and focus on the information that is being provided to you.*** One of the key components of paying attention is becoming a part of the conversation. By becoming an active participant for at least some of the lecture, rather than a passive observer for the entire lecture, you are much more likely to create a more memorable experience, thus helping you to retain information more effectively.
- ***Ask questions throughout the presentation.*** If there is one skill that is most important – and also, unfortunately, the least used – it is the practice of asking questions. Asking questions throughout the duration of class can ensure that you are finding the right targets within the information and you are forming the gateways that are going to be used to ensure you are learning the right aspects of the information.
- ***Listen and look for target or key words.*** Most instructors, when they are verbally presenting important information, will change the cadence of their speech; they will alter the volume, speed, and tone of their voice to emphasize certain information that may be more important. They may not be so subtle and even announce, “What I am about to say is important!” Be aware of these changes in your instructors’ speaking, because – chances are – they are doing this for a reason.
- ***Restate the information that has been presented.*** You will learn about this in a greater degree of detail a little later, when you get to CSRA, but just to introduce this concept, restating in your own words, or summarizing, the information that has been presented is an effective way to determine how well you have comprehended concepts. In other words, it’s a good way to tell if you have “got it” or not. Also, summarizing aloud allows your instructor to see how clearly he or she may or may not be illustrating and explaining certain concepts.
- ***Keep an active mind.*** This may seem counterproductive to the listening process, but engaging your own thoughts and observations is an important factor in listening and paying attention. If you don’t make the information relevant to your real life, you won’t remember it. Ask yourself things like, “How can I relate to this material?” “What do I think of this?” “Does this interest me?” “Why or why not?” Connecting to the material you are being presented with is essential. If you just don’t care, you will forget it. One of the many challenges of being a student is to make what you’re being presented with relevant to you, regardless of what course you’re taking.

Step Four: Learning the CSRA Method

One difficulty with actively listening and paying attention is you may be trying to do too much at one time. You may be attempting to listen, summarize, annotate, comprehend, and evaluate new information – all at the same time. What can be helpful is to instead use a simple step-by-step method in which, rather than trying to do everything at once, you separate tasks into

smaller units. **CSRA** is a method like this, and it could help you to more effectively listen and comprehend. The letters in this acronym stands for:

- **Comprehension:** This is the foundation of CSRA. Without first completing this step, you can't move on to the others. It is absolutely imperative that before you do anything else, you literally understand what your instructor is saying. It is at this point that you should consider: Can you hear the instructor? Do you need to move closer to the front of the room? Do you understand all of the words that are being used? Do you need to ask for clarification or a definition?
- **Summary:** At this point, you test your level of comprehension by restating in your own words what you think has been presented to you. You can do this with fellow classmates ("So ... here's what I think the professor meant") or with the instructor himself or herself by raising your hand and summarizing back to the instructor aloud in class ("So ... let me see if I'm understanding. You're saying that".)
- **Response:** When you respond, ask yourself how you connect to – or react to – the information you have been presented with. Remember, making material relevant to you is a big part of actively listening and paying attention, so when you respond you are attempting to connect on a more personal level. What do you think? How can you relate to this? Do you agree, disagree?
- **Analysis:** Response and analysis, though closely linked, are separate and distinct. Analysis is a deeper, more developed response. Analysis is investigation. You think about all you have heard and considered through your accurate comprehension, summary, and personal response, and you continue to go deeper and form your own detailed thoughts about this information – which could conceivably lead to a highly structured organization of thoughts known as an *essay*.

If we apply this method to lectures, we give ourselves a clear method of listening and observing.

Step Five: Using the CSRA Method to Actively Listen to a Sample Lecture

For the following exercise, you will watch a short lecture by Peter Walsh – an educator at Macmaster University in Canada. On a computer with an internet connection, type this URL into a web browser:

http://maclife.mcmaster.ca/academicskills/online_resources.cfm

When you reach this site, you will see a list of available videos about study skills. Select the video clip titled "The Good, Bad and the Useless." Before watching this video, which lasts 4 minutes and 27 seconds, please preview the information below.

While viewing this video, for the purposes of this DLA, you should not pause or rewind at any point. You should only watch the video once, all the way through. You are going to try as best as you can to recreate listening to a teacher in a classroom, where you clearly cannot pause, rewind, or watch a lecture multiple times. As you take notes, try to implement some of the

techniques discussed so far, including CSRA, and see if you notice these techniques are helping you to more effectively focus, listen, and/or understand the information. If your attention wanders, instead of getting frustrated with yourself, try simply noticing what is happening, refocus, and – later – try to pinpoint the moment your focus began to slip.

After you have watched the video, using any notes you may have jotted down, try answering the following questions to the best of your ability. Don't watch the video again; instead, just use your notes and memory. Don't worry, this isn't a test, and you are not being graded.

Did you find it difficult to follow or pay attention during this lecture? Why or why not? Be as specific as possible.

To the best of your ability, restate the major ideas presented in the lecture in your own words. What are Walsh's main ideas? What are some of the problems he is discussing? What specific solutions does he suggest?

How were you able to connect to the lecture and make it relevant for you? Were you able to use the active listening strategies and techniques presented in this DLA? If yes, what strategy or technique was the most helpful? Why?

What are three specific questions you would ask Walsh about his lecture?

PRINT STUDENT NAME

STUDENT #

Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student watched the short lecture video and used his/her listening skills and annotation techniques to take notes. The student then thoughtfully answered all four questions concerning the video.

_____ The student demonstrated an understanding of the vital role of active listening in the classroom and explained at least two specific active listening practices that he/she plans on using.

Additional Comments:

PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME

DATE

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

*STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN
AT THE FRONT DESK!*

*You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail
to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.*