



Improving Your Listening Skills

Choose things you can listen to more than one time. Regularly following the news on radio or TV can be helpful because they often repeat stories, and you can build up your cultural knowledge and awareness of current events. It is best if you listen more than one time. You can also choose podcasts, TED Talks, or other audio that you can repeat as many times as you like.

Choose listening materials that come with an accurate transcript. TV and YouTube captions are often inaccurate, but the TED talks on ted.com have accurate transcripts as do Breaking News English, Learn English with the CBC, and the Big Story podcast.

Choose topics that interest you and are relevant to you. The search function on the ted.com website lets you search for topics that are important to you.

Choose a good environment. Find a place where you can focus without distractions or interruptions. Put away any devices you aren't using, put on your headphones, relax, and listen.

Slow the listening materials down as needed. Many audio players have a setting that will allow you to slow down the audio to .75 of the natural speed. This can be helpful. You can always speed it back up once you have listened to it a couple of times!

Use active listening techniques. Actively listening means preparing for the listening ahead of time and doing things to work with the listening: anticipating topics; asking and answering questions; and using the listening activity as the basis for further work.

Here are some things you can do to listen more actively:

1. **Try to anticipate topics and think of questions you want to answer before you listen.** Examples: Who is the speaker? Who is the intended audience? What do you think the person will say? Come up with other questions that will help you focus. The point is to **listen with a purpose**.
2. **The first time you listen, listen without using any transcript, subtitles, or other clues.** You won't understand everything, but try to get a general idea of the meaning of the story. Try to answer the questions you thought of. (See idea #1, above.)
3. **Try to answer any other comprehension questions provided.** Some websites will have comprehension questions you can do after you listen. Try to answer them.
4. **Listen again with subtitles or transcripts.** Ted.com transcripts will highlight the section of the story you are hearing so you won't lose your place.



5. **Try reading aloud along with the transcript.** You can play each sentence more than once and try to mimic the speaker. Pay attention to stress, rhythm, and intonation; pay attention to pauses and pronunciation. You can do this stage more than once if you like!
6. **Try taking dictation.** Choose a short section of audio, play it back several times without the transcript, and try to write down each word. Unstressed syllables and function words like articles, pronouns, and prepositions will often be the hardest to hear, so try to train yourself to catch them. Then compare what you have written with the transcript.
7. **Before you use a dictionary, try to first guess the meaning of words based on contextual clues.** Does the word mean something good, bad, or neutral? What is the part of speech? Are there parallel or related words that can give you more clues? The John Langan “ten steps books” (such as *Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills*) have exercises to expand this skill in their “Vocabulary in Context” chapters.
8. **Keep a record of words you encounter in the listening activity.** Make a note of any new words and guesses as to their meaning, and then look them up in a clear English-to-English dictionary like Longman’s.
9. Once you feel you understand the talk, **imagine you are explaining what you have heard to a friend, and try to summarize it in your own words.** This is also a useful skill to practice if you need to write summaries. Don’t try to remember the exact words, but focus instead on the meaning, and try to capture it in your own words.
10. Finally, **listen to the whole speech again without transcripts or subtitles.** You should understand considerably more than you did on first listen!

Other helpful tips to improve your listening comprehension:

Learn about pronunciation. English is a stress-timed language. We communicate important information to the listener through stress. The Learning Centre has resources on stress, including the pronunciation book *Clear Speech* and the book *Whaddaya Say*, which has helpful tips on the ways that English speakers “reduce” and alter sounds in unstressed syllables when speaking quickly or casually.

Try audiobooks! These are available through websites like Audible or Audiobooks. If you get a print version of the book **and** the “unabridged” audio recording (a complete word-for-word recording) you can use the recording for active listening exercises.

Finally, **don’t neglect your conversation skills.** Join a group that has common interests with you through meetup.com, or find other ways to connect with people so that you can practice listening and speaking together! Volunteering is another way to build conversation skills.

