Active listening exercises

Active listening exercises give people short, structured practice in hearing, checking and summarising what someone else said. Choose from 48 original exercises for speaker, listener and observer trios, grouped by workplace situation, then run three rounds with the 30-minute plan, observer sheet and printable cards.

30 minutes | 6–18 participants | Online and adaptable in person

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The outcome

Each participant takes the speaker, listener and observer role once, receives one piece of observed feedback on their listening, and writes one listening behaviour to use in a named conversation this week.

Before the session

- For team leads, trainers and facilitators working with adult workplace groups of 6–18 people. The 30 minutes cover three practice rounds in trios, a demonstration and a short debrief.
- Choose three exercises before the session: one warm-up and two from the group that matches your participants' work. Print one set of cards per trio, or paste the three exercises into chat.
- Give every observer the observer sheet in an accessible format. Prepare three fictional topic cards, such as a delayed supplier order, for people who prefer not to talk about their own work.
- Online, prepare breakout rooms of three and a visible timer. Tell people in advance that cameras are optional and that typed responses are welcome.

Included in this kit

A facilitator run of show, participant worksheets with real tables, reference tables, debrief questions, adaptation notes and a follow-up plan. Use the editable Word copy to tailor examples and prompts before delivery.

Original material by Superglue. Timings are suggestions; adjust them to your participants. This resource has not been independently evaluated.

What is inside

The participant sheets come first so you can print one page per person. Your own facilitator section follows them.

- Observer sheet — One sheet per observer.
- Quick warm-ups — Short, low-stakes rounds for a trio of speaker, listener and observer.
- Paraphrasing and summarising — The listener checks understanding in their own words.
- Clarifying questions — Questions that narrow meaning, not questions that steer the speaker towards the listener's answer.
- Listening in meetings and small groups — Run these in a trio, or join two trios into a group of six.
- Online and hybrid listening — Exercises for video calls and mixed rooms.
- Harder conversations, kept low stakes — Use fictional or mildly frustrating work topics.
- Facilitator run of show, reference tables, debrief questions and adaptation notes — for you, after the participant sheets.

Observer sheet

One sheet per observer. Record what the listener said or did, then the effect on the speaker. Write exact words where you can; this is a record of behaviour, not a score.

Round	What the listener said or did	What the speaker did next	One thing to try next time
Round 1			
Round 2			
Round 3			

The most useful listening behaviour I saw today

_____

_____

My own practice this week, and the conversation where I will try it

_____

_____

Quick warm-ups

Short, low-stakes rounds for a trio of speaker, listener and observer. They make the listener's job visible before the topics get harder. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
1	Retell the routine: the speaker describes how they start a typical workday in 90 seconds. The listener retells the steps in order, then asks which step changes most often.
2	Three details first: the speaker explains a tool they use every week. The listener names three specific details they heard before giving any opinion.
3	Silent minute: the speaker talks for one minute about a task they finished recently. The listener stays silent, then asks one question that starts with "what".
4	Repeated words: the speaker describes a recent meeting. The listener notes only the words the speaker repeated, then asks why those words mattered.
5	Three-second pause: the listener waits three seconds after each pause before replying. The observer notes whether the speaker added more in that time.
6	Headline test: the speaker gives a one-minute work update. The listener turns it into a one-line headline, and the speaker corrects it.
7	Put it in order: the speaker lists four steps of a routine process out of order on purpose. The listener asks questions until the order is correct.
8	Name the request: the speaker describes a small problem without saying what they want. The listener asks what kind of help, if any, would be useful.

Paraphrasing and summarising

The listener checks understanding in their own words. The speaker, not the observer, decides whether the summary is accurate. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
9	Summary relay: the speaker explains a decision they made at work. The listener summarises it in three sentences and asks, “What did I miss?”
10	Half the words: the listener paraphrases the speaker’s point in about half the words. The speaker says whether anything important was lost.
11	Facts, then named feelings: the listener repeats the facts first, then reflects any feeling the speaker actually named. The observer checks that no feeling was added.
12	Known and unsure: the listener sorts what the speaker said into what they know and what they are still unsure about, then checks both lists.
13	Numbers back: the speaker includes two dates or quantities in a short update. The listener confirms both before summarising the rest.
14	New words only: the listener paraphrases without reusing the speaker’s key nouns, then checks that the meaning stayed the same.
15	Brief an absent colleague: the listener summarises the update as if for someone who missed it. The speaker corrects any change of emphasis.
16	Hidden actions: the speaker mentions three action points in passing within a longer story. The listener finds and lists all three.

Clarifying questions

Questions that narrow meaning, not questions that steer the speaker towards the listener's answer. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
17	One open question: the listener may ask only one open question after the speaker finishes. The observer notes whether it produced new information.
18	Ask for an example: when the speaker uses a general word such as "always" or "difficult", the listener asks for one specific example.
19	Vague request: the speaker gives an unclear task request. The listener asks questions until they can state the output, the deadline and the owner.
20	Check an assumption: the listener names one assumption they are making about the speaker's situation and asks whether it is correct.
21	Questions, no advice: the speaker describes a small work challenge. The listener asks three questions and offers no suggestions.
22	Wide, narrow, check: the listener asks one broad question, then one narrower question, then one question that checks their understanding.
23	What comes first: after the speaker lists several concerns, the listener asks which one they would like to discuss first.
24	Define the term: the speaker uses one piece of team jargon. The listener asks what it means in this particular case.

Listening in meetings and small groups

Run these in a trio, or join two trios into a group of six. The observer watches the whole group rather than one listener. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
25	Build on the last speaker: each person summarises the previous contribution in one sentence before adding their own point.
26	One point to check: everyone listens to the same short update and writes one point they would check. Compare which points people chose.
27	Balance the airtime: the observer notes who has spoken least. The chair then offers that person an open question they may pass on.
28	Decision echo: at the end of a short mock decision, one person states the decision, the owner and the date. Others confirm or correct it.
29	Two views, fairly: the listener summarises two different views from the discussion until both speakers accept the summary.
30	Park it accurately: when someone raises an off-topic point, the listener writes it down in their own words and checks it before parking it.
31	Interruption count: the observer counts interruptions during a five-minute discussion. The group then agrees one signal for wanting to speak.
32	Questions before judgements: after a proposal, the group may ask only clarifying questions for two minutes before anyone evaluates it.

Online and hybrid listening

Exercises for video calls and mixed rooms. Cameras stay optional throughout. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
33	Chat summary: after a spoken update, the listener types a two-line summary in chat. The speaker replies with a confirmation or a correction.
34	Voice only: with cameras off, the listener relies on words and tone. The observer notes which checking questions helped most.
35	Allow for lag: the listener counts to five after the speaker stops, to allow for audio delay, before replying.
36	Remote voice first: a remote participant explains an idea. An in-room listener summarises it for the room before any discussion starts.
37	Same page: the speaker explains a shared document. The listener asks which section to look at before commenting on it.
38	Written first: the speaker types their point. The listener restates it aloud in their own words and asks whether the meaning is right.
39	Lost thread: the speaker skips part of a story on purpose. The listener says where they lost the thread and asks for that part again.
40	Quiet signals: while the speaker talks, the listener responds only with an agreed reaction or chat symbol, then gives one summary sentence.

Harder conversations, kept low stakes

Use fictional or mildly frustrating work topics. Do not ask anyone to replay a real conflict. Print this page and cut between rows for eight exercise cards.

Card	Exercise
41	Acknowledge the impact: the speaker complains about a fictional late delivery. The listener names the impact on the speaker's work before asking any question.
42	Summarise, then differ: the listener summarises the speaker's view until the speaker agrees with it. Only then may the listener state a different view.
43	Hold the solution: the speaker describes a fictional workload problem. The listener waits two full minutes before offering any option.
44	Work, not character: the listener reflects the concern in terms of the work and avoids describing the speaker's personality.
45	Try again without defending: the speaker rejects the listener's first summary. The listener asks what was wrong and tries again, without explaining themselves.
46	Unpack a feeling word: the speaker uses a word such as "frustrated". The listener asks what happened, rather than assuming what the word means.
47	Listen, then set a limit: the listener confirms what they heard, then says clearly what they cannot help with today.
48	Spot the wrong summary: the observer hands the listener a card with an inaccurate summary to read out. The speaker practises correcting it calmly.

Facilitator run of show

1 Set up trios and roles | 3 minutes

Form groups of three: speaker, listener and observer. If one person is left over, make one group of four with two observers. If two are left over, make two groups of four. Say: "Choose a work topic you are comfortable discussing, or use a fictional topic card. You can pass at any time." Share the observer sheet.

2 Demonstrate one round | 4 minutes

Run one warm-up exercise with a co-facilitator or volunteer: two minutes of speaking and one minute of listener response. Spend the last minute asking the group what the listener said or did, not how well they did it. Point to the three observer columns.

3 Practice round one | 6 minutes

Each trio uses the first chosen exercise. Allow one minute to read the card and pick a topic, two minutes for the speaker, one minute for the listener's response and check, and two minutes for the observer to share what they saw. Announce each change aloud.

4 Practice round two | 6 minutes

Rotate the roles clockwise and use the second chosen exercise. Keep the same timing. Remind observers to record exact words where they can and to leave a column blank rather than guess.

5 Practice round three | 6 minutes

Rotate again so each person has held every role once. Use the third chosen exercise with the same timing. A group of four splits into two pairs for this round: the two people who have not yet spoken each speak to someone who has not yet listened. There is no observer in this round.

6 Debrief and choose a practice | 5 minutes

Ask two debrief questions in the main room for three minutes, taking voluntary answers only. Use the last two minutes for private writing: each person records one listening behaviour to try and the real conversation where they will try it.

Reference tables

The three roles in each round

Role	What they do	What they avoid
Speaker	Talks for two minutes about a work topic or a fictional topic card. Corrects the listener's summary.	Sharing anything they would not say in a normal team meeting.
Listener	Follows the exercise card, then summarises or asks the question the card requires. Checks the summary with the speaker.	Giving advice, changing the subject or defending their summary.
Observer	Records what the listener said or did and what the speaker did next. Shares one observation and one suggestion.	Judging personality, scoring the listener or retelling the speaker's story.

Worked example: one round of "Vague request"

A fictional round from the clarifying questions group. The words are sample answers, not evidence that the exercise works.

Minute	What happened	Observer note
0–1	The trio read the card. The speaker chose a fictional request: "Can you sort out the training room for next week?"	Topic chosen quickly; fictional card used.

Minute	What happened	Observer note
1–3	The speaker explained the request and stopped. The listener asked: “What does ‘sorted’ look like when it is done?” and “Which day, and who confirms the booking?”	Two questions narrowed the output and the owner. No advice given.
3–4	The listener summarised: “Book a room for 12 people on Tuesday, with a screen, and Sam confirms it by Friday.” The speaker corrected the number to 14.	The speaker added a detail after the summary.
4–6	The observer read their notes aloud and suggested asking about the budget next time.	One observation, one suggestion, no score.

Choose exercises for your group

If your group…	Start with	Then try
Is new to the skill	Quick warm-ups	Paraphrasing and summarising
Jumps to solutions	Clarifying questions	Hold the solution
Runs long meetings	Listening in meetings and small groups	Decision echo
Works mainly online	Online and hybrid listening	Allow for lag and Chat summary
Is preparing for a harder conversation	Paraphrasing and summarising	Harder conversations, kept low stakes

Debrief and next steps

Questions for reflection

- Which listener action made the speaker add something new?
- What did it feel like to hold back advice, and what did the speaker do with the space?
- Which exercise would work in a real conversation you have this week, and what would you change about it?

Adapt the session

- For 6–9 people, run two or three trios, using groups of four for the extra people. For 10–18, keep trios and move between them with the timer visible.
- Online, use breakout rooms of three and broadcast each role change. Allow the observer to type notes in a private document instead of speaking.
- Offer the cards in large print or as accessible text. Participants who find speaking tiring can hold the observer role twice; people who prefer writing can use the Written first and Chat summary exercises.
- Allow processing time: extend a round to eight minutes when participants need it and use two rounds instead of three. Keep all topics low stakes. This is skill practice, not counselling or conflict mediation.

After the session

Ask participants to try their chosen behaviour in one real conversation and note what happened. At the next team meeting or session, invite two voluntary examples and repeat one exercise from the same group. Do not collect or score individual observer sheets; they belong to the participants.

Questions people ask

What are active listening exercises?

They are short practice rounds where one person speaks, one person listens and checks understanding, and one person observes. Each exercise gives the listener a specific task, such as summarising, asking one open question or waiting before replying.

How long does each exercise take?

Each round in this plan takes six minutes: one minute to prepare, two minutes of speaking, one minute of listener response and two minutes of observer feedback. The full plan with three rounds, a demonstration and a debrief takes 30 minutes.

Can I run these exercises online?

Yes. Use breakout rooms of three and the online and hybrid group. Cameras are optional, and the chat-based exercises let people type rather than speak.

What if the group is not divisible by three?

With one person left over, make one group of four with two observers. With two left over, make two groups of four. A group of four has two observers in rounds one and two, then splits into two pairs for round three. Each person then holds each role once.

What is included in the free and editable files?

The open PDF and editable Word file include all 48 exercises on six cut-apart card sheets, the observer sheet, the 30-minute plan and a worked example. The Excel workbook holds the timed plan and the full exercise list. The subscriber ZIP contains the PDF, Word, Excel and CSV files with the usage terms.

Use and sharing

Free to use and adapt in your own training sessions, including paid client work. Do not resell or redistribute the unmodified download as a standalone product. Share the resource page instead.