

Being an Active Listener

Being an active listener means ridding yourself of all of the distractions that usually clutter up your various filters of the world to focus remorselessly on the point that a speaker is actually making. It means cutting through his use of easily accepted assertions and assumptions, setting aside the tone, inflection, demeanor, and everything else to focus just on what he says. You can then analyze what has been said and question the intentions and assumptions that lie behind the words and phrases. Active listening means taking into account the words that a person uses and comparing them to concepts she raises later in an argument. It is a process of asking why someone has made a statement, whether he has proved it, and what that statement really means.

Active listening is the same process as not being distracted by the fact that a salesman is talking about the weather or a politician is talking about what a lovely family you have. As an active listener, you are aware that the speaker is doing this to build some kind of connection with you so that you are more likely to trust him subsequently. As an active listener, you are able to concentrate on just the bits of the conversation that relate to whether you should buy the product or cast your vote and judge those parts of the conversation on their merits, not on the basis that the speaker has said something nice about the jacket you're wearing.

Cynical? Maybe. Realistic? You bet.

Why Use Active Listening

Debaters have a tendency to focus on—and train for—the speaking part of debating. That's understandable. For many, improving their skills as an orator is the main motivation for learning to debate. However, it's less than half the story. Debate is about the art of persuasion—to persuade you need a very clear idea of what the audience (in this case an adjudicator) is hearing and thinking. You also need a forensic understanding of what is being said by the other side—an analysis based on what is convincing rather than what sounds convincing and an appreciation that their claims and evidence can, and should, be scrutinized. After all, they are trying to persuade the same audience that you are but in the opposite direction.

Active listening allows you to witness the debate as the adjudicator witnesses it. As a result, you gain a major competitive advantage over other speakers who are busy focusing on what they will say next rather than thinking about what the adjudicator understands from