

# Reflective Listening

## What is It?

*Reflective listening* means understanding both what a person says and what a person feels, and then relaying this back to him or her in your own words.

## The Purpose of Reflective Listening

Suppose a student tells you about a difficult event with a classmate. A simple example of your response might be: "So you were really feeling angry with him." Imagine these three different responses from your tutee and the potential benefits:

- **"No. Not angry, just upset." (*refining meaning*)**

If your summary is inaccurate, your tutee will clarify what s/he actually means. Used effectively, the skill increases understanding. We often assume too much as listeners.

- **"Yeah, I guess I was." (*building self-awareness*)**

Sometimes we do not fully understand what we are saying. By repeating the person's own logic and feelings, the listener allows the person to get a new perspective which can increase his or her understanding.

- **"I sure was." (*acknowledging or validating*)**

There is often a sense of affirmation when someone has noticed how we feel about something. When somebody says, "It's obvious how much you like your job," it feels good that others have noticed.

## Guidelines for Reflective Listening

If there is any one skill which makes friendships work, it's probably the ability to listen to one another. When listening to your student remember the following points:

### **Do:**

- Give your attention to the person who is speaking.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Show that you understand by the occasional nod or smile.
- Observe non-verbal as well as verbal cues from the person.
- Hear the needs and feelings behind what the person says.
- Ask questions that will encourage the person to clarify his or her thoughts.
- Summarize the main points from time to time.

### **Don't:**

- Interrupt the person.
- Start to tell your own stories, changing the focus to yourself.
- Give advice, try to cheer the person up, judge, or divert the topic.
- Look out the window or wave to others while the person is sharing his or her feelings with you.

## Examples of Listening Responses

### Questioning

*Could you tell me a little more about what happened?*

*How did you feel afterwards?*

### Clarifying

*It sounds like you're not sure why your classmate treated you that way. Am I right?*

### Understanding

*It must be very hard to have two such wonderful opportunities to choose between.*

### Summarizing

*It sounds like you find him frustrating, yet you like him a lot.*

## Using Questions in Conversation

*Asking questions is an important part of being a good listener, but it's important to remember that there are several different types of questions, and different kinds of questions should be asked in different situations.*

### • Open Versus Closed Questions

A **closed** question has a short, often one-word response. For example:

*Do you like school?*

*How many books have you read?*

If you use too many close-ended questions, it'll be difficult to carry on a successful conversation. When you ask a closed question, you're forced to immediately come up with another question unless the speaker chooses to volunteer more than you asked.

An **open** question allows the speaker to give an expanded or more lengthy answer:

*What is the most interesting experience that you've had in school?*

*How did you get interested in geography?*

### • Personal-Feeling Versus Informational-Factual Questions

An **informational** question asks for facts and figures. For example:

*How long have you played tennis?*

*What kind of computer do you own?*

It may also be open-ended, such as:

*How does an automobile work?*

A **personal** question asks for feeling-level responses which only that person can give:

*What did you enjoy most about your field trip?*

In conversations, most people ask too many closed, informational questions. All types of questions are often necessary to keep a conversation going. Asking good questions gives the other person an opportunity to talk about meaningful topics.