

Strategy and Lesson Plans

Listening Deeply

Grades 6 - 12

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Overview

In the Listening Deeply strategy, students will learn and practice three deep listening skills: body language, focus, and empathy. In a series of lessons with different conversation starters, they will practice being active, authentic listeners with a partner— listening to make the speaker feel heard without reciprocating in the conversation. Speakers will also get more comfortable sharing about themselves and expressing feelings. Through the listening exercises, students will learn and come to value showing engagement when someone is speaking, understand people’s thoughts and feelings, and make others feel heard.

Recommended time

- 15 minutes per lesson (use the pacing suggestions or timestamps to adjust, depending on time available)
- Five lessons total, one lesson per week

Materials and advance prep

- Student journal
- Sticky notes or index cards (optional)
- A timer or clock (Lessons 2-5)
- Read through all five lessons and try to set a timeline. Lessons may require minor preparation in order to implement with fidelity and ease.

Objectives

- To help listeners develop key listening skills and skills related to expressing empathy
- To help speakers open up, share about themselves, and feel more understood
- To build classroom community and peer connection

Why this matters

There are many approaches to active listening, and this lesson centers around these primary skills: engaged body language, focus, and expressing empathy. The more students practice active listening without being in a two-way conversation, the more they’ll come to value showing interest when someone is speaking, trying to understand their thoughts and feelings, and making

them feel heard. The personal nature of the listening prompts also sets the stage for student sharing, which can build trust and connection in the classroom.

Other considerations

Encourage students to more actively and respectfully respond to each other by modeling positive responses, setting clear expectations, and providing sufficient scaffolding. Reaffirm class norms, or if you haven't yet set class norms, see [Appendix 1](#) for ideas on how to do so.

Extending this strategy

- Once a week, or at various points throughout class discussions, you can highlight the third aspect of active listening – expressing empathy – and make a habit of asking students to paraphrase or repeat what a fellow classmate said, as well as to validate their feelings (if applicable).
- Play one or more of the following Making Caring Common games: *Echoing a Friend*, *Spotlight*, *Listening Deeply Game*, or *All My Friends and Neighbors*. The games are a great way to transition in or out of a strategy lesson, or you could play the games during other days in order to maintain or boost the positive interactions in your class.

Lesson 1: Introduction (10-20 minutes)

Introduce the strategy (1 minute)

Begin by saying, “*This week we are going to begin a series of lessons focused on our strengths as listeners. I hope that each of us could name a time when someone really listened to us and the powerful impact we felt knowing that they were listening. But I’m sure we each could also name a time when we felt like someone really wasn’t listening to us and the way that made us feel. Today we are going to begin by thinking about what makes someone a strong listener.*”

MCC Tip: Try to write the definitions and examples of body language, focus, and expressing empathy (see below) on an anchor chart or classroom board before the lesson begins. Plan to display these skills and definitions in your class throughout the strategy.

Modeling deep listening (15 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to role-play active listening with you. Choose a fun prompt or question for them to respond to (e.g., dream vacation/holiday/favorite hobby) using [Appendix 2](#) as a guide. Make sure you demonstrate the skills below: body language, focus and expressing empathy.

Once the student has finished their response, ask the class what specific skills they noticed and how they knew whether each person was listening actively. Next, ask the student volunteer if they felt heard and what made them feel heard.

Write the following terms on the board and go over definitions and examples:

Body Language, Focus, Expressing Empathy

Ask students to brainstorm what each term might mean when it comes to *listening*. Encourage students to reflect on what these terms mean in their family and culture. Make a note that communication and listening can look different in many different cultures and settings, but it is important to make others feel heard and to listen to understand. Take suggestions for definitions verbally from students, then explain each skill, highlighting the following definitions and examples:

Body Language: How are you physically positioned in relation to the speaker? Use body language and gestures to convey true listening.

- Good examples: eye contact, nodding, facing forward or toward speaker
- Bad examples: slouched, turned sideways of speaker, arms crossed at all times, facial expressions that communicate disapproval or disgust at the speaker (e.g., eye rolling)

MCC Tip: Be aware that there are many cultural differences in body language during communication, for example, differences surrounding the role of eye contact in demonstrating respect and active listening. Follow classroom norms and encourage students to share their personal and cultural connections to these skills.

Focus: Are you truly listening to what the person is saying, or are you waiting for your turn to speak? Pay attention by “tuning in” to the other person’s feelings and perspective while trying to minimize distractions and your inner dialogue of thoughts and judgments.

- Good examples: say “mm-hmm” at appropriate times, repeat key words mentally for reinforcement, keep your phone out of sight, avoid thinking about your response while the other person is talking, and avoid distractions (e.g., side conversations, phone ringing)
- Bad examples: look at your phone, look away, think about something else or yourself, interrupt the speaker with stories about yourself

Expressing Empathy: What are you saying or doing to make the speaker feel heard? It can make a big difference to a speaker if they are feeling affirmation from a listener. Whether you agree with the speaker or not, try to consider why he or she feels that way, and how you can better relate to them. Think less about how you would feel or think in their situation, and more about them. ***That’s empathy: the way we relate to others by trying to understand and feel what they are going through, especially those who are different from us.***

- Good examples: After they’re done speaking, you can demonstrate that you heard what they said by paraphrasing (e.g., “So what I heard was...”), or asking thoughtful clarification questions (e.g., “what did you mean when you said...?”). You can validate feelings by saying, “I could sense that you felt... is that right?” and “I can understand why you’d feel...”
- Bad examples: Asking the same question over and over, bringing up your own story right away after they’re done speaking, misrepresenting what they said, telling them that what they felt was wrong.

Wrap-Up (1 minute)

Wrap up Lesson 1 by saying, “For the next week or so, I encourage you to spend some time reflecting on your habits of listening and searching for examples of deep listening.” Tell them when you think the next lesson will be.

Advanced Prep: *For the next four lessons (Lessons 2-5), you will use the Listening Deeply Protocol in Appendix 3 and then Debrief Questions in Appendix 4. Each lesson lists specific introductions and prompts for the activity.*

Lessons 2-5: Role-Playing as Listeners (15 minutes per lesson)

Over the course of four lessons, facilitate this activity using different prompts. On the following pages you'll find suggested prompts, but feel free to choose your own instead.

Lesson 2

Introduce Lesson 2 by saying, *"Today we are taking a deep dive into the listening skills we reviewed and considered last time. We are going to practice our listening skills with our peers. I want to acknowledge that this might feel a little awkward or silly at first – that is OK and totally normal – but I will push you to consider why this work matters and the impact listening can have on others and ourselves."*

MCC Tip: *As you move through the lessons, consider having students generate topics that they are eager to discuss, or have them vote on the sample prompts.*

Follow the "[Listening Deeply protocol](#)" outlined in Appendix 3. Use the sample prompts below or refer to the list in [Appendix 2](#).

- What did you do this weekend?
- What's your favorite memory or vacation so far?
- What are you afraid of and how can you conquer your fears?

After completing the protocol, bring the group together for the [protocol debrief](#) in Appendix 4. You should facilitate an honest and low-pressure opportunity for students to reflect on their first attempt at the protocol. Wrap-up by letting students know when you think the next lesson will be and ask them to look out for instances of deep listening to share next time.

Lesson 3

Begin by asking if students have examples of “listening deeply” (i.e., active, authentic listening) that they could share with the group. Ask students to elaborate on who, where, and what they saw and why they thought it was an example of deep listening. Be prepared to share an example of your own as well, especially if few students respond.

Then, start students with the [protocol](#) again in Appendix 3. Use the sample prompts below or refer to the list in [Appendix 2](#).

- Who is someone you look up to and why?
- What are things you like or enjoy that maybe some people, even those close to you, might not know about?
- How do you want to improve as a person?

MCC Tip: *You can also use prompts from your curriculum or current teaching in class. For example: “What is your favorite thing about the math we’re doing in class, and what is most difficult for you?” Or, “Which character in the text you’re reading for English class do you most admire and why?”*

After students complete the protocol, bring the group together for the [protocol debrief](#) in Appendix 4. Wrap up by letting students know when you think the next round will be and to bring a (mental) “listening deeply shout-out” to class next week to highlight someone in our community that uses deep listening skills to make others feel heard.

Lesson 4

Start by sharing a shout-out for a student who you saw “listening deeply” this week. Make sure your shout-out follows a clear and replicable format, such as,

“I have a shout out for _____, because I saw him/her/them listening deeply to _____. I could tell they were listening because_____ (reference the listening habits from lesson 1).

Then, open the discussion for other students to share shout-outs using the sentences above.

Begin the [protocol](#). Use the sample prompts below or refer to the list in [Appendix 2](#).

- Have you experienced a challenge you then overcame? What happened? Did anyone help? What did you learn?
- Have you felt really angry or guilty about something? What happened and how did you or could you resolve it?
- Has there been a time when you wanted to help someone but couldn’t? What happened and how could you change things for the future?

MCC Tip: *At this point you may want to push students to listen to each other for longer. Increase the listening time from 1.5-2 minutes to 2.5-3 minutes each!*

After students complete the protocol, bring the group back together for the [protocol debrief](#). Wrap up by letting students know when you think the next lesson will take place.

Lesson 5: The Final Lesson

Introduce the lesson (1 minute)

Introduce the final lesson by telling students, “*Today we are doing the last lesson of the Listening Deeply Protocol. During this lesson, focus on all aspects of listening: body language, focus, and expressing empathy. Do your best to be an excellent partner, and have fun!*”

Begin the [protocol](#). Make sure students are in new pairs with partners who they are not close to. Use the sample prompts below, refer to the list in [Appendix 2](#) or use class-generated prompts.

- What do you want to get better at that many people might not know about?
- What are some deep insecurities or fears you have?
- What are some big hopes or wishes you have for yourself and other people (whether close to you or not)?
- What is a favorite memory or short story from your life that encapsulates who you are?

***MCC Tip:** At this point, push your students to listen to each other for longer. Increase the listening time to 3-4 minutes each!*

After students complete the protocol, bring the group back together and engage students in a discussion of the following prompts. If time is tight, make sure to address the final, bolded, questions. If you have more time, ask students to first journal in response to the bolded questions before sharing out.

- **How did the final lesson go? Which listening skills have you improved upon the most?**
- What did you learn about your partner? What did you learn about yourself?
- What still feels difficult to you? How can you work on it?
- **What impact could we have on others by listening more deeply?**
- **How can we transfer these skills into our daily lives?**
 - **Ask students to think about key areas in their lives: as a student, as a son/daughter, as a teammate (in class, sports), as a boyfriend/girlfriend, as a citizen, or as a member of their community.**
 - **Ask them to think of one example for each of the skills that they can employ in their own lives, and ask if anyone is willing to share. Tell them that a pledge—whether verbal or internal— can help to make the changes stick.**

Wrap up (1 minute)

Wrap up the lessons by telling students something like the following: *“Through our work over the last several weeks, we’ve developed our listening skills. Being a strong listener shows those you are interacting with that you care about what they have to say, and it can broaden your mind so you better understand new ideas and perspectives. I am proud of your work from this week and look forward to seeing more examples of deep listening in our class going forward!”*

Extension ideas

- Use the listening protocol in your lesson plans and academic content areas. For instance, if students are discussing a story or film, ask them to get into pairs and share their perspective while their partner listens without the need to immediately offer their own perspectives.
- Play the [Listening Deeply Game](#) as a break in class and to continue to build a strong school community.
- Once a week, or at various points throughout class discussions, you can highlight the third aspect of active listening – expressing empathy – and make a habit of asking students to paraphrase or repeat what a fellow classmate said, as well as validate their feelings (if applicable).

Appendix 1: Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles

Before you dive into meaningful class discussions, it is important to generate or reaffirm your class norms. When we establish norms together we create buy-in and trust. Doing this also provides explicit, shared codes of conduct that remind students how to engage in constructive discussions. Norms are also a great strategy for diffusing heated conversations and prompting students to return to agreed-upon norms when things get too uncomfortable within the group.

1. Challenge ideas rather than people.
2. Assume good intentions and “listen generously.”
3. Take responsibility for your impact on others in the classroom.
4. Expect and accept non-closure. If you leave class with questions, it’s ok and it’s likely.
5. Stay engaged.
6. Try to avoid sweeping generalizations and stereotypes. Remember that there are wide variations within and between races, ethnicities, economic classes.
7. Consider the diversity of the people in the room and imagine how others in the room might experience your comments.
8. Consider what responsibilities you are asking other students to bear. It is not ok, for example, to ask a person to speak on behalf of all members of the community or the group to which they belong.
9. Remember that students in this class have varying levels of familiarity with different topics.
10. Remember that mistakes are normal and are useful learning opportunities in meaningful discussions.
11. Keep mistakes and conflicts among us and seek to work out mistakes and conflicts within the class.

12. Maintain confidentiality of classroom discussions, especially on sensitive topics; take and share lessons from class, not people's stories.

13. Treat diverse opinions as an opportunity. Challenge yourself to try out new ideas you hear in class and see how they apply in your life.

14. Seek to constructively engage with views you may disagree with. Ask caring questions, and listen deeply to the perspectives of others, especially those you may disagree with.

Rather than “calling out” or letting others know publicly they made hurtful or oppressive comments in a way that may cause them shame, try to “call-in” others by expressing your views and experience with the intention to help them understand your point of view or speaking with them privately about the impact of their hurtful or oppressive comments. ”

15. Aspire in classroom conversations to create an ethical community - a community that expects and supports honesty, candor, appreciation, forgiveness, fairness and deep engagement with challenging questions.

Appendix 2: Sample Prompts

- What did you do this weekend?
- What did you do last summer?
- What's your favorite memory or vacation so far?
- What's your favorite time of year or season? Why?
- What do you like to do for fun?
- What is your favorite tv show, movie or book?
- If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be?
- If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?
- How are you feeling about this school year?
- Who do you feel closest to?
- What are you afraid of and how can you conquer your fears?
- Who is someone you look up to and why?
- What are things you like or enjoy that maybe some people, even those close to you, might not know about?
- How do you want to improve as a person?

Appendix 3: Listening Deeply Protocol

Listening Deeply Protocol for Lessons 2-5

For Lessons 2-5, you will use the following format. Each lesson will have specific introductions and prompts.

[2 minutes] Place students in pairs. For this activity, do not allow students to self-select their pairs. During each lesson, we recommend students are paired with new partners who they don't know very well. Say, *"Today we are going to grow as listeners by talking with our classmates about [topic]!"*

MCC Tip: *When grouping, you can have students arrange themselves in a line by birthdate. Have students whose birthdays are closest pair up for the first activity, then pair those whose birthdays are furthest from one another, and finally, pair those with odd numbers, and so on. Pick your own prompts, ask your class for suggestions on what prompts they want to hear about from their classmates, or use the list in [Appendix 2](#). Get creative and have fun!*

[1-2 minutes] Once students are in pairs, tell them that the first speaker has 1.5-2 minutes to talk, with no contributions from their partner except practicing the listening skills they learned. For the listening partners, you'll remind them of the three listening skills, and remind them to "think and feel and listen for the nuances in their partner's responses." Keep track of time for the class and instruct students when it is time to move on. Circulate throughout to hear student discussions.

[1-2 minutes] Once the time is up, the listening partner has 1.5-2 minutes to engage in brief conversation. Don't tell them "to express empathy," but do remind them that the listener can *reflect on what's been said by paraphrasing (e.g., "So what I heard was..."), asking thoughtful clarification questions (e.g., "what did you mean when you said...?"), and acknowledging others' feelings*. Concrete examples are often most helpful.

[3-4 minutes] Then, it will be the listener's turn to speak for 1.5-2 minutes without interruption, followed by conversation with their partner. Throughout, be sure to encourage students to use the three listening skills.

Appendix 4: Protocol Debrief

Protocol debrief (5-10 minutes)

After each listening deeply session, ask students a *selection* of the following questions to guide their overall reflection for five to ten minutes. Students can respond verbally or in their journals, though you'll want to save time for students to share their reflections if they journal. Use the bolded questions if time runs short.

- What was it like to only talk? What was it like to only listen for ____ minutes?
- What elements of verbal and nonverbal communication did you notice?
- How does it feel to be listened to fully? What does that look or feel like?
- **How does it feel when you're not listened to? How does your behavior change?**
- **How does it feel to listen poorly? What did that look like for you?**
- **How does it feel to listen at your best? What did that look like for you?**
- **What do you think gets in the way of good listening in your life? How could you change that?**
- What did you learn about your partner? What did you learn about yourself?
- Do you think you're getting better at listening/communicating?
- **Why do you think listening is important for empathy? How can we show we care about someone "just" by listening?**
- How can deep listening look different based on your different background, for example how your family communicates or expects others to behave?