

Communication Skills

Being a tutor is a very important and meaningful job. The students coming to UCLA are counting on our services to help improve their academic career at ISU. It is essential that you are knowledgeable in your content area, and familiar with the textbooks and syllabi of the courses we tutor. It is also necessary to have excellent communication skills. A tutor can be a genius in his/her content area, but if he/she does not have effective communication skills the tutee will not benefit from the tutoring sessions.

Effective communication is critical to the tutoring cycle. And effective listening is critical to good communication. This training session will concentrate on ways to help you develop active listening skills and give you some techniques that you can employ to help make you a more effective communicator.

Common Communication Errors (Things to Avoid)

First, let's look at some things *not to do*. These communication errors are common, but they can be avoided by taking a proactive approach. Be conscious of these common errors and reflect on these before your tutoring sessions.

- Finishing another person's sentences
- Preparing a response before someone is finished speaking
- Multitasking while "listening", e.g., flipping pages, shuffling papers, doodling
- Tuning out boring speakers, judging delivery
- Allowing distractions to disrupt concentration
- Entering into arguments before hearing all of the speaker's thoughts
- Showing no energy output

Be a Good (Active) Listener

The rest of this session will give you ideas and strategies to help you increase your communication skills by being a good active listener.

- **Make direct eye contact with the tutee.** Of course you will need to look at your notes and material you have prepared, but eye contact keeps you focused on the job at hand and keeps you involved in the session.
- **Use positive gestures, head nods, and keep an open body position.** This will help the tutee to feel comfortable about sharing his/her thoughts with you.
- **Focus on content, not delivery.** Have you ever counted the number of times a student wiggles around in his/her chair in a fifteen minute period? If so, you weren't focusing on content!
- **Avoid distractions.** Don't let your mind wander or be distracted by the person shuffling papers near you. If the room is too hot or too cold try to remedy that situation if you can. The solution may require that you dress more appropriately to the room temperature.

- **Treat listening as a challenging mental task.** Listening to a student during a tutoring session is not a passive act – at least it shouldn't be. You need to concentrate on what the student is saying so that you can be able to offer the needed assistance.
- **Stay active by asking mental questions.** Active listening keeps you on your toes. Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you listen. What key point is the student making? How does this fit with what I know from previous sessions?
- **Avoid emotional involvement.** When you are too emotionally involved in listening, you tend to hear what you want to hear – not what is actually being said. Try to remain objective and open-minded.
- **Wait for the tutee to finish their full statement before interjecting.** Listen without response, in other words be SILENT.

The Importance of Silence

Many tutors really want to help their tutees and therefore want to talk or demonstrate to feel they are “doing” something. Too often they fall into the trap of playing the role of “professor”. The tutee has now missed the chance to share with the tutor their real problems or concerns. Be patient and let the tutee finish their statements completely. If you wait long enough the tutees will convey what they know, which is much more empowering for them than just hearing what the tutor knows.

While it may seem that being quiet is doing nothing, when you are quiet you are actually giving the tutee the opportunity to do something. Quiet is hard for tutors to do! Whether what you do is explain, ask questions, or finish sentences the tutee starts, the fact is that when you talk, the tutee is likely to stop talking. Once the tutee stops talking, the tutee has become *passive*. And, of course, we want the tutee to maintain an *active* role in the tutoring session.

Observations of hundreds of tutoring sessions reveal that when tutors talk, the overwhelming tendency is to explain course material to their tutees. And if tutors explain the material to tutees, then tutees are not explaining the material. Nor are they learning how to learn that material for themselves. Thus tutors who aren't good at being quiet are likely to be training their tutees to be dependent. Practice the important communication tool of **SILENCE**.

Active Listening Tools

Active listening is a vital part of communication in general and tutoring in particular. Notice that we are emphasizing the “**active**” part of active listening. Active listening is about focusing and concentrating on the person who is speaking. It takes effort and practice, but pays off in helping the tutee succeed. Some ways tutors can show they are actively listening is to do the following:

- ask good questions,
- paraphrase, and
- empathize with the student

Asking questions

Often questions can seem accusing or blaming to the person asked. A question may make the person feel backed into a corner. For example, if a tutor asks his or her student, "You didn't read

your textbook, did you?" it is clear that the tutor does not approve of the student. Consider how much easier it would be to respond to the question "What did you think of the reading?" In order to be a good active listener, you need to make sure that you ask questions honestly and sincerely, and that the intent behind questioning is to understand rather than criticize, or pry. Active listening questions intend to:

- Clarify meanings: "I hear you saying you are frustrated with class, is that right?"
- Learn about other's thoughts, feelings, and wants: "Tell me more about your ideas for the project."
- Encourage elaboration: "What happened next?" or "How did that make you feel?"
- Encourage discovery: "What do you feel your options are at this point?"
- Gather more facts and details: "What happened before this fight took place?"

You can be fairly sure you are asking questions correctly if you:

- Do not assume you know what your tutee means; don't try to complete the tutees statements or say, "I know just how you feel."
- Ask for clarification with questions such as: "What did you mean when you said your professor has been 'unfair to you'?"
- Check your tone for sincerity. As you are talking to students, check that your tone of voice matches your feelings and body language.
- Ask open-ended questions that allow for a variety of responses. If you ask closed-ended questions, you limit the range of responses and suggest that you already know what is going to be said.
- Show interest in the speaker and the conversation by saying, "Tell me more about that" or "Keep going, I'm following you."
- Don't give advice until after you have asked for the person's opinions on the situation, as in "What are some possible solutions to this problem?" or "What do you think should happen?"

Paraphrasing (re-stating)

Paraphrasing is a tool a you can use to make sure that you understand the message that you think a student is sending. It is restating the information you just received to make sure you understand it. For example, a student might say, "I hate math and the teacher because she never lets us do anything cool!" You might say, "It sounds like you're having a hard time with math and that makes you feel frustrated and bored." This technique helps tutors and students communicate in several ways.

- First, it helps tutors make sure they understood the message correctly.
- Second, by restating or paraphrasing, tutors draw further information from students.
- Third, paraphrasing lets students know that the tutor has heard them and is interested in what he or she has to say.
- Fourth, it allows the tutee an opportunity to correct any misunderstanding immediately.

Empathizing

Empathizing means that you (as a tutor) have the ability to be able to put yourself in a student's shoes. To empathize you must ignore your own perception of the situation for the moment and accept the other person's ideas of the situation.

- Empathizing does not mean you need to agree with the student.

- Empathizing means you do not dismiss what the student is saying as ridiculous or silly.

You know you are being empathic when:

- Your body language and tone match.
- Your tone and your feelings match.
- You are focused on what the student is saying and meaning.
- You are tired after listening because it takes a great deal of energy.
- You are trying to see things from the student's point of view:
 - You do not impose your feelings, thoughts, and ideas throughout the conversation.
 - You refrain from immediately giving advice.