

# Active Listening — Workbook

This workbook is your hands-on companion to the Active Listening course. Each section corresponds to one course module and gives you exercises, worksheets, and checklists to move the concepts from theory into the real conversations you have every day. Work through the sections in order the first time, then return to individual tools as needed for specific challenges.

## The Anatomy of Real Listening

Build your baseline — understand your current listening habits and calibrate your awareness of the three-layer model.

### Exercise: Listening Autopsy: Replay a Recent Conversation

Choose a work conversation from the past week where something felt off — a misunderstanding, a missed cue, or a decision that later needed to be revisited. Replay it in your memory and answer the prompts below.

- What was the speaker's core message at the content layer? Write it in one sentence — without adding your interpretation.

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- What emotional state do you now think the speaker was in? Did you register that at the time? If not, what were you attending to instead?

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- What did the speaker actually need from you in that moment (information, validation, problem-solving, venting)? Did your response match that need?

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- At what point in the conversation did your attention drift, your bias activate, or your reply-composing brain take over? What triggered it?

### Worksheet: Three-Layer Conversation Map

Use this worksheet live or immediately after any significant conversation this week. Fill in each layer separately. Repeat for three separate conversations to see your patterns.

Conversation date and context (who, what situation)

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Content layer — the key facts or events the speaker stated

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Emotion layer — the emotional state you sensed (name the specific emotion, not just 'stressed')

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Intent layer — what the speaker needed from you in that moment

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Your response — what you actually did

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Mismatch (if any) — where your response diverged from the speaker's actual need

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What you would do differently next time

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### Checklist: SOLER Body Language Pre-Conversation Checklist

- I have put my phone face-down (or out of sight) before the conversation begins
- I am positioned facing the speaker squarely, without a desk or large object as a barrier
- My arms are uncrossed and my posture is open
- I have leaned slightly forward to signal interest
- I have set an intention to maintain steady, natural eye contact with brief breaks every 5–7 seconds
- I have taken one slow breath before the conversation to settle my nervous system
- I have identified the conversation type (informational, developmental, or emotional) so I know which layer to prioritise

## Section

Practice forming and sequencing questions that surface real meaning — not just the answer you expected.

### Exercise: Question Rewrite Lab

Below are six closed or leading questions commonly used in professional settings. For each one, rewrite it as an open or probing question that invites genuine exploration rather than confirmation. Avoid embedding your hypothesis in the question.

- Original: 'Was the project delayed because of the client?' — Rewrite as an open question that does not assume a cause.

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- Original: 'Don't you think we should increase the budget?' — Rewrite as a question that invites the other person's genuine assessment.

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- Original: 'Is the team demotivated?' — Rewrite as a question that explores the team's actual state without labelling it.

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- Original: 'Did the meeting go badly?' — Rewrite to surface what actually happened rather than seeking confirmation of your framing.

### Worksheet: Question Planning Sheet — High-Stakes Conversation Prep

Before any important conversation (performance review, negotiation, difficult feedback, client discovery), complete this sheet. Do not enter the conversation without it.

Conversation purpose — what outcome am I hoping for?

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My assumptions going in — what do I already believe or expect to hear?

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Risk of confirmation bias — which of my assumptions am I most likely to seek confirmation for?

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2–3 open questions to start the conversation without loading my assumptions

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2–3 probing questions to use if the conversation stays at a surface level

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1 clarifying question to deploy if I sense I may have misunderstood

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My planned 'And what else?' moment — at what point will I use this?

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## Checklist: In-Conversation Question Quality Check

- I asked one question at a time — never a double question
- I paused for at least 3 seconds after asking each question before speaking again
- I did not answer my own question when the speaker paused
- I used at least one 'And what else?' probe to go deeper after the first answer
- I avoided leading questions that embedded the answer I expected
- I matched my question type to the context (closed for facts only, open for exploration)
- I noticed when a question triggered defensiveness and adjusted my approach

## Reflecting, Paraphrasing, and Summarising

Build the precision tools that prove you have understood — and catch misunderstandings before they become expensive.

### Exercise: Paraphrase Precision Drill

Read each speaker statement below and write a strong paraphrase for it: content mirror + emotional layer + verification check. Do not repeat the speaker's words verbatim. Aim for a paraphrase that is about 40% shorter than the original.

• Speaker says: 'I've been working on this proposal for three weeks and every time I present it someone has a new objection. I'm starting to wonder if they actually want a solution or just like having a problem to discuss.' — Write your paraphrase.

• Speaker says: 'The new process is fine but nobody was trained properly so half the team is doing it differently from the other half and now the reports don't match. I raised it twice and nothing happened.' — Write your paraphrase including the emotional layer.

• Speaker says: 'I think the client is happy — they haven't complained. But I also haven't heard from them in three weeks which is unusual.' — Write a paraphrase that surfaces the ambiguity without projecting.

### Worksheet: TRACK Summary Practice Sheet

After a meeting or significant conversation, use the TRACK structure to produce a written summary within 30 minutes while the details are fresh. Share it with the other participant(s) to verify accuracy.

T — Theme: the main subject of the conversation in one sentence

R — Recap: 3–4 key points made (without editorialising)

A — Acknowledge: what mattered most to the speaker(s) — their priorities or concerns

C — Confirm: the response you received when you checked accuracy (what was corrected or confirmed)

K — Keep open: any unresolved questions or topics to revisit, with a proposed next step

### Checklist: Paraphrase and Summary Quality Checklist

- My paraphrase was shorter than the original statement
- I did not add meaning the speaker did not state
- I included the emotional layer where it was present
- I ended with an open verification question, not a closed 'right?'
- The speaker confirmed accuracy (or corrected me) before I moved on
- My summary covered all key themes, not just the ones most interesting to me
- I named unresolved items explicitly rather than glossing over them

## Exercise: Feeling Vocabulary Expansion

Most professionals default to fewer than 15 emotion words. Use this exercise to expand your precision vocabulary before you need it in a live conversation.

- List every word you currently use to describe negative emotions in a professional context. How many did you list? Now look up the 'Atlas of the Heart' emotion wheel (Brené Brown) and identify 5 words you could use with greater precision than your current defaults.

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- Think of a time you felt 'frustrated' at work. Was it actually frustration — or was it resentment (injustice perceived), overwhelm (too much at once), or disappointment (expectation unmet)? Write down which emotion was most precise and why it matters to name it correctly.

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- Practise the emotional reflection formula on a real recent situation: 'It sounds like you were feeling [precise emotion] about [situation]. Is that close?' Write out three versions for three different recent interactions.

## Listening in Difficult Conversations

Build the protocols and self-awareness systems to maintain listening quality under pressure, in conflict, and across your blind spots.

### Worksheet: Personal Listening Bias Profile

Complete this self-assessment honestly. Your bias profile is the foundation of your sustained improvement plan.

Confirmation bias: name a belief you hold strongly at work. In your last month of conversations, what evidence that contradicts this belief did you receive? Did you give it full weight?

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Status bias: list two people whose input you probably over-weight and two whose input you probably under-weight based on their title or seniority rather than content quality

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Narrative completion: describe a recent conversation where you completed the speaker's thought in your head before they finished — were you right? What did you miss?

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Self-referential listening: in your last 5 conversations, how many times did you return the conversation to your own experience? Is this a pattern?

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Your primary bias pattern (the one that most often distorts your listening)

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One specific practice you will use to interrupt this bias in the next 30 days

### Exercise: Accusation Audit — Difficult Conversation Preparation

Before a conflict conversation, negotiation, or any exchange you are dreading, complete this audit. Based on Chris Voss's technique from *Never Split the Difference*, the goal is to drain emotional charge before it escalates.

- List every negative thing the other person might be thinking or feeling about you, the situation, or what you are about to say — be honest and thorough. Do not defend yourself in this list.

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- Identify which of these concerns is most emotionally loaded for them (the one they most need acknowledged before they can engage rationally).

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- Draft your opening statement for the conversation — name their concerns explicitly and early, before making any ask or argument of your own. Write it out in full.

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## Checklist: 90-Day Listening Practice System

- I have identified my primary listening bias and written it where I will see it daily
- I have completed a listening debrief (4 questions) after at least one significant conversation this week
- I have chosen one specific technique to practise deliberately for the next 7 days
- I have told at least one colleague I am working on my listening — creating accountability
- I have asked at least one person for feedback on their experience of being listened to by me
- I have reviewed my debrief notes for the month and identified my most recurring failure pattern
- I have set one specific, measurable goal for my listening improvement in the next 30 days
- I will re-run my bias self-assessment at the 90-day mark and compare to my baseline

## Your Action Plan

1. This week: complete the Listening Autopsy exercise on one recent conversation where something felt misaligned
2. This week: use the SOLER checklist as a physical reminder before your next three significant conversations
3. Week 2: complete the Question Planning Sheet before one important upcoming conversation and debrief afterwards
4. Week 2: practise the Probe-Pause-Affirm sequence in at least two conversations — notice how silence changes the quality of answers
5. Week 3: run the Paraphrase Precision Drill, then deliberately paraphrase in every team meeting for one week
6. Week 3: use the TRACK Summary method after one meeting and share it with participants for accuracy verification
7. Week 4: complete your Personal Listening Bias Profile and identify your primary distortion pattern
8. Week 4: use the Accusation Audit before the most difficult conversation you have scheduled this month
9. Month 2: establish your weekly listening focus habit — one technique per week, reviewed Friday
10. Month 3: ask three people who know you professionally to rate whether they feel genuinely heard in conversations with you — use their feedback as your real benchmark









