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For more information about ***Time Out! For Men***, please contact:

Institute of Behavioral Research
Texas Christian University
TCU Box 298740
Fort Worth, TX 76129
(817) 257-7226
(817) 257-7290 fax
Email: ibr@tcu.edu
Web site: www.ibr.tcu.edu

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Listening

Session Length: 2 hours

Objectives

Understand listening as a learnable skill

Explore common listening problems

Identify good listening habits and practice listening skills

Rationale

Listening is a foundation skill for all good interpersonal relationships, intimate and otherwise. In addition, the ability to listen is associated with both learning and reasoning, critical issues in behavior change and recovery. This session seeks to emphasize that listening is a skill that can improve relationships and facilitate self-growth, and to provide practice toward skills building.

Session Outline



Procedure	Time
Welcome and Process Homework	10 minutes
Exercise: Focused Listening	30 minutes
Listening Skills	25 minutes
Break	10 minutes
Practice: Listening Skills	35 minutes
Homework: <i>Listening to Each Other</i>	10 minutes
Total Time for Session 3	120 minutes

Materials

Easel and flip chart (or chalkboard)
 Magic markers; pencils, pens, writing paper
 Prepared flip chart *Listening Task*
 Prepared flip chart *Walls—Poor Listening Habits*
 Prepared flip chart *Bridges—Good Listening Habits*
 Prepared flip chart *Listening Guidelines*
 Prepared flip chart *Rule of Restatement*
 A “speaker’s staff” or other symbolic object (See Preparation Notes.)
 Copies of handouts

Preparation Notes

*Prepare
flip charts*



Listening Task

Write out the listening activity topic question on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:

Listening Task

If you could meet
 a famous person,
 either living or dead,
who would it be,
 and why?



Walls—Poor Listening Habits

Write out key points on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:

Walls Poor Listening Habits

TUNING OUT

BRICK WALLING

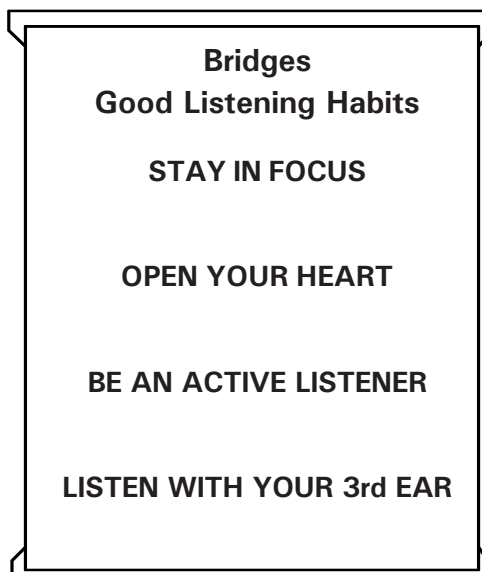
DEFENSIVE LISTENING

MECHANICAL LISTENING



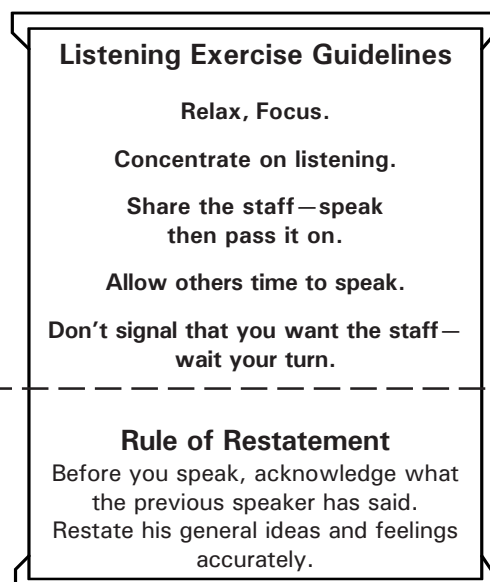
Bridges—Good Listening Habits

Write out key points on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:



Listening Exercise Guidelines

Write out instructions on a large piece of flip chart paper or poster board, as shown:



On a separate sheet, write out the **Rule of Restatement**.

Obtain "speaker's staff"

Bring to group a stick, staff, wand, cane, or some other item you can use to designate who has the floor. A "speaker's staff" or other symbol is used in some Native American cultures and in other cultures around the world to remind those involved in a communication event of the sacred obligation to listen. Basically, when someone holds the stick or staff, no other person may speak or interrupt until the speaker finishes his/her thoughts and passes the stick on. The person who takes the stick must first acknowledge what the former speaker said before speaking himself.

Photocopy handouts



Walls and Bridges (handout, p. 53)
Listening Dos and Don'ts (handout, p. 54)
Listening To Each Other (homework, p. 55)
Session Evaluation (form, p. 56)



Procedure

Welcome and Process Homework

Welcome participants as they arrive.

- 1 Use the first 10–15 minutes to review and process the homework assignment. Begin by briefly reviewing a few key ideas from Session 2, such as:**

Last week we spent some time discussing assertiveness, that is, having the right attitude when we communicate—an assertive attitude. Remember that an assertive attitude has to do with mutual respect, maturity, and taking care how we say things.

We also talked about the difference between I-Statement and You-Statements, and how I-Statements are more in keeping with an assertive attitude. The homework assignment asked you to pay more attention to I-Statements and to practice with your partner. Let's talk for a few minutes about how things went with the homework.

- 2 Ask for volunteers to share their experiences with the homework. Here are a few ideas for questions to start the ball rolling:**



Process
questions

Was the assignment easier or more difficult than you expected? In what ways?

How did your partner respond to the homework?

Were both of you able to make your “quota” of I-Statements each day? If not, what got in the way?

Did anyone find themselves actually using more I-Statements than asked for in the assignment? Tell us about that.

What did you learn from the homework exercise?

- 3 Thank volunteers for their input.** (“I know it may have felt awkward, but you got the job done, guys. Thanks for telling us about it.”) Encourage participants to keep up the good work.



30

Exercise: Focused Listening

- 1 Use the next 25–30 minutes to introduce the topic and lead a brief focused-listening activity.** The exercise should help participants develop an awareness of the importance of listening and of their own barriers to good listening habits.

Here are some points to include in the opening discussion:

Today's topic is listening. We'll spend the whole session on listening because it's the most important communication skill of all. In fact, it's probably the most important life skill, too. And, sadly, it's a skill that most of us take for granted. We confuse hearing with listening, or we assume that if we follow a conversation well enough to jump in with our own opinions, then we are listening. Today's session will give us a chance to explore these assumptions about listening, and to learn how to listen better.

Listening is a skill. Listening is a *skill*. One more time...listening is a skill. When we talk with couples who tell us they believe they have a good, satisfying intimate relationship, the willingness and ability to listen to each other is at the top of their list of important factors that contribute to the relationship. To put it more bluntly, unless couples can master the skill of listening (*really* listening) to each other, the outlook is grim. The relationship is likely to become cold and distant, or angry and defensive, or simply to end.

As men, we sometimes have to get our minds straight before we can learn to become good listeners. Remember, we talked about society's stereotypes for men—that men are suppose to be in charge, in control, and always ready to take action. As men, we're *suppose* to know it all, right? So why should we listen? In our efforts to appear in control, to keep others from thinking of us as “weak,” to put up a manly front, we may end up sacrificing that very thing that could help us the most—listening. The wise man listens, digests what he's heard, then speaks. The foolish man talks, talks, and talks.

Now that you've heard the pep talk, we'll try an exercise to get things warmed up. As you might guess, the exercise will ask you to really focus on listening.

- 2 Introduce the listening activity by asking participants to choose a partner.** Ask partners to sit facing each other. Encourage them to move chairs to allow enough distance between others for easy talking.



Flip chart

3 Give the following instructions, and display the prepared flip chart of the *Listening Task* to help keep participants on track:

- In this exercise, each partner will talk for exactly two (2) minutes on the following topic:

If you could meet a famous person, either living or dead, who would it be and why would you choose this person?

- I'll keep time. I'll time the first speaker for two minutes, then I'll call stop. You will then swap roles, and the second person will talk for two minutes.
- The person who is not talking *must* listen. The listener should not say anything—not a word. However, the listener *must* let the speaker know that he is really listening.
- Basically, you are each going to practice listening to another person for two minutes. Any questions? Take a minute to pick your famous person and decide what you want to say.

4 Allow a minute or so for participants to organize their thoughts, then begin the activity and monitor the time.

5 When the activity is complete, go around the room and ask each person to state his partner's choice of a famous person and then tell why that person was chosen by the partner. In other words, each person is asked to demonstrate how well he was able to listen to his partner's disclosure.

6 Process the exercise with the following questions. Encourage discussion, especially around the ways we nonverbally signal to others that we are listening.



Process questions

How accurately did your partner tell the group about your choice of famous person and your reasons?

Was it easy or difficult to concentrate on listening? Why?

When you were speaking, what did your partner do that helped you sense that he was listening?

When you were listening, what did you do to help make sure the other person knew you were listening?

In real life, what usually gets in the way of your ability to listen?

- 7 Thank participants for their input.** (“You guys have really done some good work on this issue—thanks for sticking with it!”).



25

Listening Skills

- 1 Use the next 20–25 minutes to discuss listening skills.** The key point to stress is that listening is a skill; in other words, we can all learn how to become good listeners.

Here are some ideas of things to say:

When we see people in counseling who are having relationship troubles, the complaint we are apt to hear most often is: “She just doesn’t listen to me.,” or “He never listens!!” If all you get out of this whole workshop is learning how to listen a little better, you’ll have gotten a lot. Listening is not just important in our intimate relationships—it’s important in our jobs, in our recovery work, and in just about every aspect of life. Keep this thought in mind—it’s a skill. With practice and training, we can learn to listen.

Listening is difficult because as we hear others talk, our thoughts and our feelings are stimulated, and it’s easy to fall into the habit of listening to our own inner-dialogue, rather than to the person speaking. Sometimes we don’t listen well because we are tired or we become distracted by something else going on. And sometimes, we just don’t want to listen, because we’re doing something else or we don’t have the time. This is okay. There’s no rule or expectation that we must be good listeners all the time, no matter what. We want to learn good listening skills so we can listen well when it’s important for us and for our relationships to listen. It varies from day to day, and from situation to situation, but most of us can judge when it’s important to listen. For example, we know it’s important to listen when we want to solve a problem with our partners, when we want to understand why our partner has been upset, when our partner needs to tell us about what’s going on with the kids, when our boss needs to tell us about a new job he wants us to work on, when our treatment counselor needs to tell us about our progress, or maybe when our partner just wants to tell us about what kind of day she had.

Some of you may be thinking: “But what if I can’t or don’t want to listen when my partner needs to talk?” For example, you’re watching the big game on TV, and your partner wants to tell you all about how the washing machine has been acting up. Keeping an assertive attitude in mind, how might you respond?

Here's an idea: "Baby, I know you're worried about that washing machine, and I'll be glad to sit down with you after the game is over to talk about it. I want to be able to give you my full attention, and right now that's difficult for me because the Cowboys are down 7 points." Of course, the ball is now in your court. When the game is over, you must let your partner know you are ready to talk and listen. The point is, if you're not able to listen, say so. And since you care about the relationship, set an "appointment" to talk it over and listen at a later time.

Whatever the situation may be, when you know you need to listen for the sake of the relationship, the key is to tear down walls and build bridges instead. Let's look at the "walls" to good listening that we all stand behind from time to time (consciously or unconsciously):



Flip chart

2 Briefly review the examples of poor listening habits. Use the *Walls—Poor Listening Habits* flip chart to focus attention on the points.

Use some of the following ideas to lead the discussion:

Tuning Out

(Pretending to listen, not paying attention, distracted)

Tuning out is a common poor listening habit. We've all had the experience of talking with someone, only to realize that they are a million miles away. Or we've found ourselves pretending to listen ("Yes, dear. Whatever you say, dear."). As simple as it may sound, the first rule of good listening is paying attention.

Brick Walling

(Planning what you'll say next, mentally arguing with speaker)

The term brick-walling probably comes from the old description: "Trying to talk to him is like trying to talk to a brick wall." Instead of focusing our attention on the speaker, we are planning our next response or mentally arguing or disagreeing with the speaker. When we get into brick-walling, we are apt to interrupt the speaker, jump in before he/she is finished, or even finish sentences for the speaker.

Defensive Listening

(Listening for perceived put-downs, becoming angry or hurt too easily)

Defensive listening is emotional listening. Often, when we're feeling hurt, angry, or misunderstood, we listen defensively. We scrutinize the speaker's every word, looking for a hint of a put-down, threat, or insult. This makes us prone to hear insults when none are intended, causing us to start brick-walling.

Mechanical Listening

(Focusing only on speaker's words, not the meaning)

Words carry only part of the message. A good listener is able to hear not just the speaker's words, but the meanings and feelings associated with the words. Some people are more prone to mechanical listening than others—they take everything literally. Here's an example: Mary is very upset with John because he hasn't been helping out with the kids. John says he's going out for a beer. Mary says: "Oh, sure, just go on out and leave me with the kids again." John goes out. When he comes back, Mary is really, really mad. She says: "John, how could you do that!!??" He says: "But you **told** me to go on out." Granted, Mary was being a little sarcastic—but John's mechanical listening means he heard only the words and not the meaning.

3 Conclude by asking participants to consider some of the following questions:



Process questions

Can you think of any times when you've practiced one of these poor listening habits? Which one?

Did you do it consciously or unconsciously?

What effects did it have?



Flip chart

4 Briefly review the examples of good listening habits. Use the *Bridges—Good Listening Habits* flip chart to focus attention on the points. The main idea to get across is that when people make an effort to listen better, they actually do listen better.

Use some of the following ideas to lead the discussion:

Now that we've explored the "walls" or the poor habits that get in the way of good listening, let's talk about how we can turn those walls into "bridges," in other words, the basics of good listening skills.

Stay in Focus

(Pay attention, concentrate on listening, tune out distracting thoughts)

Effective listening means making a conscious, mental effort to pay attention, stay focused, tune-in, open your ears and your mind, and concentrate on what the speaker is saying. This means letting the speaker finish without interrupting, making a commitment to really understand the speaker's message, and using your mental power to focus, focus, focus. Sometimes our own feelings and emotions get in the way. Under certain circumstances, it is normal to become emo-

tionally involved with what the speaker is saying. While at these times we can't avoid emotions that come up while we're listening, we can make an effort to not respond emotionally and interrupt the speaker.

Open Your Heart

(Be supportive, uncritical, interested, concerned—want to listen)

Listening is the most loving thing we can do for one another in an intimate relationship. If someone is important to you, it's natural to want to be supportive, interested, concerned. Really listening to someone conveys all those things, and more. When we really listen, we make the other person feel valued, cared about, and worthwhile. It's also important to be patient with the speaker. Most of us can hear and understand faster than most speakers can talk—and sometimes we get mentally ahead of the speaker. It's helpful to relax, stay tuned in, and let the speaker be herself/himself.

Be an Active Listener

(Ask for clarification, give feedback, keep eye contact, nod, smile, etc.)

As you listen, show that you understand what the other person is saying. Ask questions, ask the speaker to rephrase something you didn't understand, check out your understanding of what the speaker has said by repeating it back in your own words ("So you're saying you are really happy with the way things have been going at your 12-step group"). Listen intently, make eye contact, and pay complete attention. If it's appropriate, smile, nod, pat the speaker on the back, or put your arm around her to show support or sympathy. In other words, really be there.

Listen with your 3rd Ear

(Pay attention to the speaker's feelings as well as to the words)

Let the other person know that you understand their feelings as well as their words. If you're not sure of what the speaker is feeling, check it out. "You seem to be feeling pretty depressed about what happened—is that how you're feeling?" When we communicate with others, we always communicate feelings as well as literal meanings. It's important to pay attention to the feeling part of the message, especially in our close, intimate relationships.



Handout,
p. 53

5 Distribute the *Walls and Bridges* handout and conclude by asking participants to consider some of the following questions:



Process
questions

When is it easiest for you to use good listening skills?

When is it difficult?

Which listening skill do you think you most need to improve?

Which listening skill would you like for your partner to improve?



Break



35

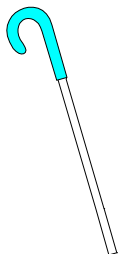


Flip chart

Practice: Listening Skills

- 1 **Lead a practice session on listening. Use your *Listening Guidelines* flip chart to highlight the rules.** For this exercise you'll incorporate Roger's Rule of Restatement, an aid to active listening (Rogers, 1961), and the symbolic use of a staff or stick to help participants stay focused on the speaker. Help participants grasp the key concepts, but don't be afraid to relax and have fun with this activity.

Use some of the following ideas to get into the exercise:



We could talk all day about listening, but the way we learn to listen is by listening, so we're going to spend the rest of the session talking and listening to each other. When you go home tonight, you can show your partner the techniques you've learned, and hopefully practice some more. For this exercise we'll be borrowing an idea from older cultures. It's the idea of using an object to symbolize or show who has the floor. We'll use this staff and call it the "speaker's staff." Here's how it works. Whoever holds the staff, holds the floor. Whoever holds the staff may speak. All others must focus on and pay attention to the speaker. When he finishes his thoughts, he then passes the staff to another person. The person who receives the staff must first acknowledge what the previous speaker said. We'll call it the "rule of restatement." When you receive the staff, you may speak only after you have restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker to that speaker's satisfaction.

- 2 Ask for a volunteer, and demonstrate how the process should run.** Let the volunteer speak first and then hand the staff to you. You then model the way a restatement may be given. If needed, do a second demonstration with another volunteer until you sense that the group gets the main idea.

Your exchange with the volunteer might sound something like this:

Volunteer: I think the Cowboys (*or whatever team is popular in your area*) are an overrated team and that they don't have a chance at the Super Bowl this year. Emmitt Smith (*or whoever*) is weak as milk—that guy has the wool pulled over everyone's eyes. (*He hands you the staff.*)

Group Leader: I hear the point you are making, brother. You say the Cowboys are an overrated team and you are less than impressed with Emmitt Smith. I hear a lot of feeling in your voice. I have a different opinion. I believe the Cowboys are the best team in the history of the NFL, and that they will once again be contenders for the Super Bowl. (*Hand the staff to another group member to test if folks are catching on to how this is done.*)

Ask if there are any questions and clarify rules, as needed.

- 3 Use the rest of the time to hold a group discussion, using the speaker's staff. Introduce a topic or ask the group to select one.** Have the group stand in a circle for the duration of this exercise. Pick a topic that is stimulating or even controversial. A topic with absolutely no emotional content won't work as well as a topic that people have feelings about. If the discussion gets waylaid, refer participants back to the rules on the flip chart, and start again.

Do one "round" where the staff is passed in clock-wise fashion around the group. Then do a second "round" in which the staff is passed randomly—helter-skelter. If helpful, do a different topic for each "round."

- 4 Process the exercise using some of the following questions:**



Process
questions

Was this exercise easier or harder than you thought it would be?

What was different about the two rounds?

Which round was the most difficult for you?

As we stuck with it, in what ways did it become easier to do?



Process
questions

Did you ever feel like reaching over and grabbing the staff?

How did you manage that?

What did you learn from this exercise?

5 Thank participants for their contributions to the exercise.
("This kind of exercise is not easy. You guys have really come across. Good going!")



Handout,
p. 54

6 Distribute *Listening Do's and Don'ts* handouts, and encourage participants to find time to share this information with their partners.

7 Provide closure by wrapping up on some of the key points raised during the session.

Here are some ideas for closing comments:

So far, we've hit on two important things we can do to improve communication in our important relationships—practice assertiveness and practice good listening. Remember that communication is the cornerstone of intimacy and closeness in a relationship.

An assertive attitude helps us participate in our relationships as equals. It's an attitude of mutual respect, openness, and willingness to compromise.

Part of an assertive attitude is being willing to listen. We spent some time today working on the skills we need to become better listeners. Remember, we are good listeners when we tune out our own thoughts long enough to really focus on the speaker. Next week we'll move on to more advanced communication skills. So stay tuned.



Homework,
p. 55

Homework: Listening to Each Other

1 Distribute *Listening to Each Other* homework handouts and provide the following instructions.

Your assignment for the next week, gentlemen, is to share the ideas you learned today with your partner. Go over the characteristics of an assertive attitude and talk about how you both can work toward handling your relationship with that kind of attitude.

The same for the listening skills. Talk with your partner about what you learned today (and listen to what she thinks about it all!)

Lastly, on your way home, find a nice looking stick, or piece of wood, or something you can call a “speaker’s staff,” and practice using it with your partner like we did here in group. The object you choose doesn’t matter. You could also use a candle, a knickknack sitting around the house, an orange, or an “ear” of corn. You just need something to serve as a symbol.

Remember the rule of restatement. You have this information on your handouts so you can refer to it when you need to. It would be great if you could use this technique several times during the week when things come up and you and your partner are having trouble listening to each other. But at least try and use this technique once in the coming week.

2 Thank participants for attending and invite them back next week.

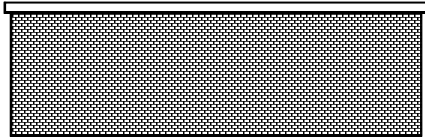


Evaluation,
p. 56

3 Ask each person to complete an evaluation form before leaving.

Walls and Bridges

WALLS



Tuning Out

Pretending to listen
Not paying attention
Distracted

Brick Walling

Planning what you'll say next
Mentally arguing with speaker

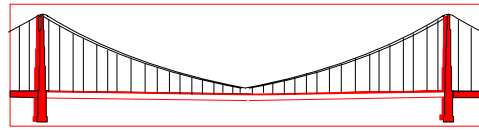
Defensive Listening

Listening for perceived put-downs
Becoming angry or hurt too easily

Mechanical Listening

Focusing only on speaker's words,
not the meaning

BRIDGES



Stay in Focus

Pay attention
Concentrate on listening
Tune out distracting thoughts

Open Your Heart

Be supportive, uncritical,
interested, and concerned—
want to listen

Be an Active Listener

Ask for clarification
Give feedback
Keep eye contact, nod, smile, etc.

Listen with Your 3rd Ear

Pay attention to the speaker's feelings
as well as to the words

Listening Do's and Don't's

Goals

- 1. To improve communication**
- 2. To understand the speaker—to really listen**
- 3. To let the speaker know you are listening**

DO

Let the speaker have his/her say

Show nonverbally that you are paying attention and that you're interested

Respond verbally by giving accurate restatements of the speaker's message

Begin your restatement with introductions such as "What I hear you saying is" or "So you're saying...."

DON'T

Daydream, plan what you want to say next

Interrupt to object, explain, or correct

Nonverbally indicate disagreement, hostility, or lack of attention

Respond verbally with judgment, analysis, argument

Add anything additional to the message when you are giving a restatement.

Source: Adapted from *Communication Today*, Sproule, 1981.

Session 3 Homework
Listening to Each Other
Partner Information

Listening is a skill. It's perhaps the most important communication skill for helping make relationships closer and stronger.

Many people throughout history have understood the importance of listening.

In many cultures across the world, when people came together to discuss important things, they would use a symbolic object to help everyone stay tuned-in to listening. Often times this object was a decorated staff. We can use this idea in our daily lives.

Decide on an object you would like to use with your partner as a speaking and listening symbol. It can be anything—a staff, a cane, a candle, a wand, a household knickknack. Just so both of you know what it is.

Use this object to help you both focus on listening and communicating in the coming week. When you need to talk, or you need your partner to listen, just say: "Wait a minute. Let's get the _____ (whatever you've chosen to be your speaker's staff or symbol)."

Here are a few guidelines to follow:

Relax, Focus, Concentrate on listening.

Share the staff—speak then pass it on.

Allow the other person time to speak.

Don't signal that you want the staff—wait your turn.

Rule of Restatement

**Before you speak, acknowledge what the speaker has said.
 Restate his/her general ideas and feelings accurately.**

SESSION EVALUATION *Time Out! For Men* Session 3

THIS BOX IS TO BE COMPLETED BY DATA COORDINATOR:

SITE # __ __ [1-2]	CLIENT ID# __ __ __ __ [3-6]	DATE: __ __ __ __ __ __ MO DAY YR [7-12]	COUNSELOR ID# __ __ [13-14]
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INSTRUCTIONS: Please take a minute to give us some feedback about how you liked this session.

1. Use one word to describe your reaction to today's class. _____

2. What is the most important thing you learned today?

3. What listening habit do you plan to improve in yourself? Why is it important?

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you rate today's class? (Circle your rating)

01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	__ __
Poor			Pretty Good				Excellent			[15-16]

5. Do you have any suggestions to help make this class better?