

Chapter

3

Critical Listening



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Chapter Outline

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3.1 How Listening Works

The majority of people have poor listening habits, but there is hope! If you do a cursory Google search of “listening skills,” you will get almost 300 million hits, from *definition* to *skill development and training programs*, from the educational sector to the self-improvement sector. *Forbes*’ “10 Steps to Effective Listening” is the top result. Of Fortune 500 service corporations, 59 percent provide listening training to their personnel. Clearly they view listening as important.¹

It is crucial to note that *listening* is not the same thing as *hearing*. Hearing is a physiological process whereby sound waves travel through the ear canal to create a vibration on the eardrum. These vibrations are then sent to three little bones in the middle ear that serve to amplify the sound vibrations and send them to the cochlea within the inner ear. Upon receiving the sound waves, the fluid inside the cochlea begins to ripple, causing tiny hair cells to move up and down, bending their tips to make channels for chemicals to enter the cells and create an electrical signal. This signal is sent to the brain via the auditory nerve, and the brain registers the information as the sound you recognize.²

Hearing is one of the body's five senses. But listening is an art.

Frank Tyger,
Cartoonist

Listening, on the other hand, is a mindful process. **Mindfulness** is *choosing to engage in the listening process*. Listening requires choosing to attend to the sounds you hear in order to make sense of the message. Unlike hearing, listening is an art, and how you listen depends on what your goal is.

3.1a Assume a Style

You listen for different reasons—because you feel you have to, because you’re enjoying yourselves, because you want to learn something, and because you want to argue with what is being said—and your reasons for listening affect your listening style.

Listening experts have described styles of listening as *active*, *supportive*, *analytic*, *people-centered*, *time-oriented*, *critical*, *appreciative*, and even *therapeutic*.³

Additionally, six composites of these styles that are often prevalent in audiences are reluctant, appreciative, empathic, comprehensive, critical, and aggressive.

Reluctant

You assume the **reluctant** style when *you feel or think you had better listen, even if what is being said is distasteful*. This would include classes you don't like, sermons you've heard before, and situations you would just as soon avoid but cannot. Motivation, to say the least, is low. You must work at getting out of this style or find ways to be better listeners within the reluctant style.

**First listen, my friend,
and then you may shriek
and bluster.**

Aristophanes,
Greek playwright

Appreciative

Listeners assuming the **appreciative** style are generally more responsive, more discerning, and more interested in the topic than *reluctant* types. For example, during classes that you enjoy or speeches you find stimulating, attention comes more readily because *you feel that the time spent is rewarding or that the information will be of use to you*. Motivation is not a problem, but this listening style is a passive style. You may still not be an effective listener if you are so appreciative that you are not thinking objectively, if it is difficult to hear the speaker, or if your listening skills are poor.



Listeners assuming the appreciative style are attentive because they feel that time spent listening is rewarding.

Empathic

Sometimes the situation calls for listening in order to imagine another's experience. This can be difficult for people who want to fix things or find reason amongst emotion. **Empathic** listening requires that you listen as if you are in the speaker's shoes. A good empathic listener will refrain from listening only to the words and seek to *understand the feelings* of the speaker. This is supportive listening and, unlike appreciative listening, requires strong active listening skills.

Comprehensive

A **comprehensive** listening style is what good listeners employ when trying to understand the message being delivered. When an instructor is

providing novel information to the class, good listeners will be trying to *understand the meaning* of what is being said. This active listening style requires suspending judgment in order to clearly understand the intent of the speaker and the depth of the material. The motivation to listen comprehensively comes from the desire to understand what you previously did not.

Critical

In **critical** listening, critical thinking skills are fairly but firmly applied to what you are listening to, whether you are pro, con, or neutral on the topic. This *evaluative* form of listening requires a democratic, questioning, responsive mindset. If need be, you generate your own interest and motivation to listen. When *critically listening*, you judge the message as being supported, legitimate, valid, effective, or acceptable. A good listener cannot critically listen, however, if they have not comprehensively listened to the message first.

Aggressive

This is more of an opinionated, watchdog style than that of the *critical* listener described above. **Aggressive** listening frequently appears when faced with high-pressure persuasion for products, political issues, or value systems. You might consider this a nonlistening style because it tends to prompt intrapersonal responses in the form of argument rehearsals, which, if unremitting, lead to ineffective listening. Your biases intrude to the point of disruptive interpretations of what is being said.

In conclusion, you should strive to achieve an objective, *appreciative* style when seeking pleasure, an *empathic* style when someone is in need or is providing a particularly emotional story, a *comprehensive* style when seeking understanding, or an evenhanded, *critical* listening style when attempting to determine the validity of the message. The less rewarding *reluctant* and *aggressive* styles tend to reflect nonlistening behaviors. If you have adequate access to the message, possess most of the necessary listening skills, and maintain the motivation to listen, you are on the way to becoming an ideal listener.

We will have more to say about critical thinking and listening shortly. First, let's take a look at the psychological mechanisms involved in the listening process.

3.1b A Process Model

As we discussed earlier, listening is much more than paying attention and hearing. Your memory, as well as all of your senses, may be called on to make sense of a speaker's oral signals in a wide range of settings.⁴ The verbal messages often take on a quite different or sharper meaning as you observe the nonverbals that don't involve hearing, such as the speaker's eyes, gestures, body movements, and clothing. The tone of voice, pitch, or emphasis are also considered nonverbal signals and play a role in the listening process. As you learned in Chapter 1, making sense has to do with how you assign meaning, that is, how you socially construct what you think you are hearing or seeing.

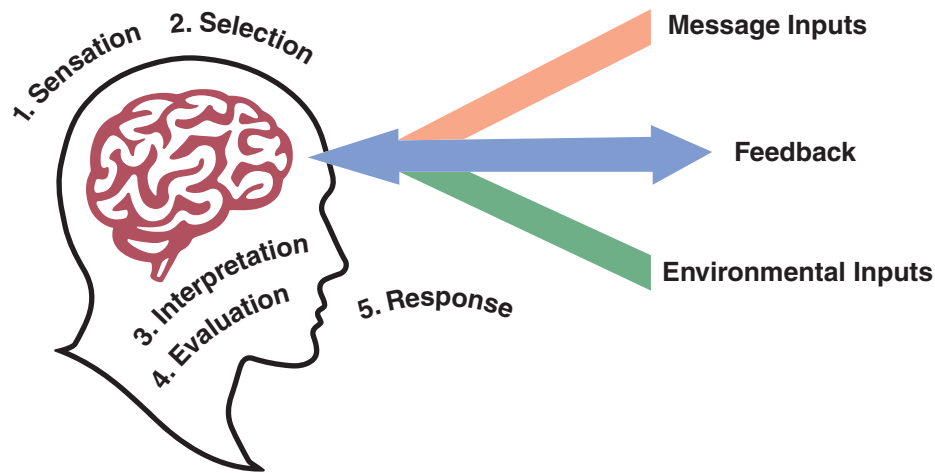


(dennizn / Shutterstock)

Good listening habits are important. Fifty-nine percent of the Fortune 500 service corporations provide listening training to their personnel.

Listening, like other kinds of perceptual activity, goes through a process: sensation, selection, interpretation of the sensory inputs, evaluation, and response. The response is both internal (intra-personal) and external (feedback). The speaker's message, as well as input from the environment (Figure 3.1), affect and in turn are affected by all steps in the process. External responses go through a similar process as they return to the speaker.

Figure 3.1 Listening Process



Sensation

This first phase of the listening process depends heavily on *hearing*. But all of your senses operate in most speaker/audience situations. Some sensory barriers are reasonably obvious. If someone is operating a jackhammer or beating a drum, you may lose the verbal signal because of sheer noise. College students frequently are given audiometric screenings (hearing tests), and some are found to have hearing losses of which they were unaware.

You have probably learned that you hear poorly when you are tired. **Sensory distraction** could be competing noises, other verbal messages, or distraction by the other senses. A really foul smell, temperature extremes, or an attractive face—any of these can disrupt sensory inputs and, therefore, what you hear.

Consider the first-grade teacher who has just put on the thirty-fifth pair of boots when the last child says, “These aren’t my boots. They ...” “Oh no, no, no,” interrupts the teacher as she removes the boots, counting audibly to ten. The child finishes her sentence. “... they are my sister’s. I couldn’t find mine this morning.” The teacher is jumping to conclusions about what the child is saying or is trying to say. A certain amount of mindlessness may be involved at this phase. New information is not heard or truly processed. Prior experiences become stereotypes to reenact.

Think of phase one as mostly auditory **sensation**, to which all other senses and distractions may contribute. Assume you have overcome the barriers and are willing to remain attentive; you are finally hearing, but you may not be seriously listening. Your first sensory experience in phase one often has a lot to do with the listening style you unconsciously choose and, thereby, how you *select* and *interpret* (phases two and three).

Selection

You cannot attend to all of your surroundings, or else you would be so oversaturated as to not be able to distinguish one sound or idea from another. Therefore, the second phase of the listening process is **selection**. *You select certain sounds over others, certain visual stimuli over others, particular ideas over others—all depending on the purpose of your listening activity and your interest.*

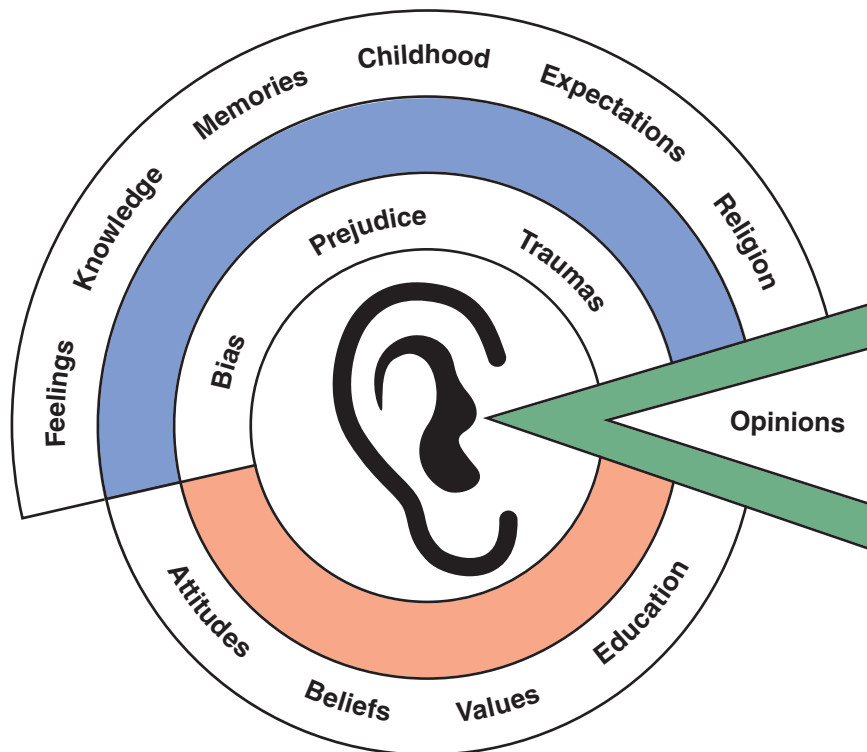
Additionally, within your focus, you tend to “listen to” the ideas with which you are familiar or can make sense of and filter out information that is foreign. Although you need the process of selection to stay sane, it is also the first step in discounting information that may be important to your understanding the message.

Interpretation

After adequate sensory access and the process of selection, phase three is **interpretation**. Good message interpretation depends mostly on intrapersonal inputs. *Your knowledge, past experience, beliefs, attitudes, emotional blocks, and so forth come to bear on what you’ve heard.* Critical decoding has begun. A listener’s motivations, intelligence, cognitive complexity, and attitudes will greatly affect what meaning she will attribute to the sensory inputs that she has selected.

These factors serve as additional filters that often unconsciously affect the interpretations of what you hear. Limited experiences that otherwise might help you decipher and interpret the message or nonlistening skills, like prejudgments and jumping to conclusions, affect your ability to interpret the message accurately. Consider some of the following in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Listening Filters



Considerations for Ethical Listening Online

Similarly to being in a classroom on your campus, you will find yourself spending more time listening rather than speaking online, maybe even more than in the classroom.⁵ What does it take to “listen” synchronously in your online virtual class? Can you “listen” in online discussion forums, asynchronously? How can you increase your listening skills? And what does it mean to listen *ethically* in an online forum?

Unfortunately there is not a lot of research on listening online. The research appearing the most is in reference to asynchronous listening, via discussion forums.⁶ Online listening behaviors in this context are described as how learners interact in discussion posts: how often, which ones, and in what depth. One way you can increase your listening skill here is to read through the post and responses carefully to understand the message and then engage with the message while aligning your response to the prompt. To comment without fully understanding the posted message, or the prompt, is a sign of poor listening. Engagement is key here.

- Read to understand the message.
- Know your own biases and set them aside while you seek to understand the message.
- Ask for clarification rather than posting a comment when you are unclear of the writer’s intent or meaning.
- If you lack knowledge on the topic, take the opportunity of asynchronous communication to delay your response until you do some research.

If you are meeting in a virtual classroom, like Zoom, your listening behaviors will be similar to those you develop in the campus classroom, similar to asynchronous listening, and similar to the considerations provided in Chapter 1.

Again, choosing engagement and mindfulness is key here:

Listen carefully. Opportunity often speaks imprecisely.

What does it all mean? If you understand anything the speaker is trying to say, what do you understand? At this point you are interpreting what you have unconsciously selected from the original message. Now you draw upon all of your inputs and your skills at managing attributions of meaning.

Attribution theory deals with how and what you infer about behaviors, attitudes, and intentions you observe or know, or think you know, in others and in yourselves. The **discounting effect** is an important part of attribution theory. The discounting effect suggests *a given cause should be discounted if other plausible causes are also present*. For instance, if a speaker is speaking quietly and is difficult to hear, you might attribute this behavior to speech anxiety. If you know that this student has been ill, however, you might discount the anxiety explanation since her illness is another plausible cause.

Evaluation

Once the sensory stimuli have been *selected* and narrowed down to something manageable for the listener and then *interpreted* for meaning (based on the knowledge, belief, attitude, and experience), the process moves to its fourth phase: **evaluation**. *You begin to decipher whether the message is accurate, truthful, helpful, justified, and so on.* You evaluate to accept or reject the message. One suggestion is to withhold evaluation until you have heard the person out. Once you have evaluated the message, you respond.

Response

The fifth phase of the listening process is response. Internal **responses** deal with the final results of your perceptual and attributional efforts during the interpretation and evaluation phases. This is an ongoing process. You do not have to be at the end of the process to respond. These internal responses may signal understanding or confusion, approval or disapproval, and so on. It is the start of vigilant critical thinking that leads to external response.



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Feedback can be both verbal and nonverbal: asking questions, back-channeling with “uh-huhs,” or even nodding.

and is encouraging the speaker to continue. Quizzical facial expressions may indicate the need for further clarification. Leaning forward often indicates interest. Nonverbal vocal expressions can also be in the form of **back channeling** (uh-huh, hmmm, and other sounds that encourage the speaker to continue). **Verbal feedback** can be in the form of direct questions or encouragements to continue. (“Please continue.” “Excuse me, I am not sure I understand.”)

Verbal and nonverbal responses can help an alert speaker adjust her message. Unfortunately, they can also confuse and occasionally unnerve a speaker. A blank stare might indicate to the speaker that the listener is not interested when, in fact, the listener is mesmerized by the novel information being provided.

The job of the listener in creating the message is just as important as it is for the speaker. It begins with presence to sensory stimuli, is followed by the unconscious selection of what will be attended to, proceeds to interpreting what has been selected, evaluating the message for acceptance or rejection based on the interpretation, and finally ends with a response. Good listening habits include providing fair but forthright feedback. The job of listening is hard work!

- Be prepared by completing reading assignments, thereby familiarizing yourself with vocabulary likely to be used in discussion.
- Listen to understand the message.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions about the message or the speaker.
- Avoid sight and sound distractions: on your screen, in your room, out your window.
- Strive to make the connection between the message and the content of the lesson.
- Consider taking notes with your own thoughts or questions on the side.
- Practice the Ten Keys to Effective Listening guidelines in Chapter 3.

External responses are the overt manifestation of those internal signals—*feedback*. (See Chapter 1.) They can be both verbal and nonverbal. **Nonverbal feedback** may consist of nods, indicating the listener is still listening

3.2 Listening Improvement Areas

Listening is a difficult process even under the most favorable conditions. One reason for this is that *you think much faster than you talk*. This is referred to as **thought speed**.⁷ The average rate of speech for most Americans is about 120 to 180 words per minute. But you can listen to and process between 400 and 800 words per minute without a significant loss in comprehension. This difference between your talking speed and thinking speed is a lot of time that can distract you from good listening habits.

... helping a student unlock his or her thoughts for others, the communication teacher also unlocks a potentially demanding citizen, a citizen with the mental agility to listen between others' lines when they speak and to remember her or his own bottom line when responding to them.

Roderick P. Hart,
Dean, Moody College of Communication

Three specific areas where you can pragmatically improve your listening behavior are *motivation*, *access*, and *skills*. These take place in a sea of knowledge and beliefs that affect your thinking habits and might, therefore, seriously affect your listening behavior.

First, consider the specific areas. For example, three students are clearly confused after a lecture on primitive art:

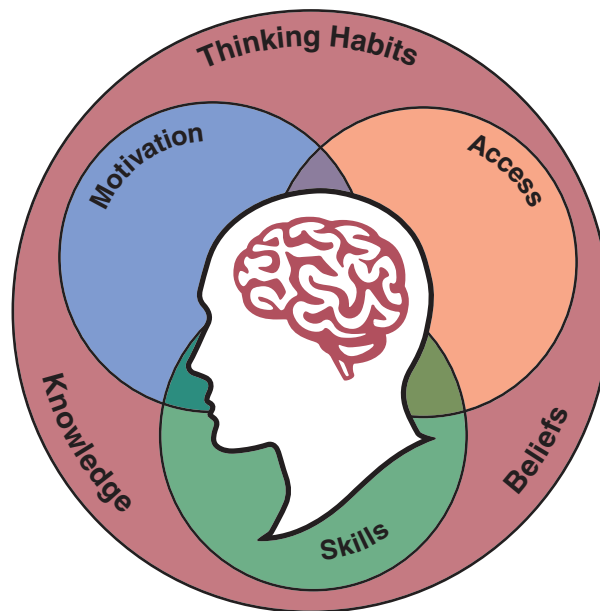
John: "I really don't dig this stuff. Bore-ing!"

Hamza: "Good, but I no understand too much."

Ruth: "Okay, I guess, but my notes are meaningless."

John's listening barrier is a lack of *motivation*. Assuming Hamza has interest and motivation, his problem is *access*: specifically, a language barrier. Ruth has primarily a *skill* problem. She has interest and access, but her ability to organize what she's heard (note-taking) is poor.

Figure 3.3 Listening Improvement Areas



3.2a Improving Motivation to Listen

Rudy, a theater major and a reluctant listener, falls asleep in his chemistry class. His interest is zero. He is taking chemistry because it meets the science requirement and is the only class that fits his play rehearsal schedule. Not much motivation here—perhaps Rudy is a lost cause.

But wait—concentrate on what motivation there is. Rudy needs to meet a science requirement. This class allows him his first love, namely, acting; if he fails the course, he could lose it all. In short, he has sought motivation in a larger system of interest.

Although it is unlikely that Rudy will ever develop a consuming interest in chemistry, perhaps he can somehow relate the class to his theater interests. “Maybe I’ll play a mad chemist in a Broadway play.” “I’ll have a better feel for *Arsenic and Old Lace*.” “Perhaps I can *act* like a chemistry major for one term.” On the other hand, perhaps discretion is the better part of valor, and Rudy will quietly withdraw and take a different course at another time.

In review, to improve motivation to listen, look for motivation (positive or negative) in a larger area of interests, relate the topic at hand to your own selfish interests, and translate the problem to an intellectual challenge: “I’ll figure out this turkey subject!”

Rudy should also carefully read the material on improving listening skills, which follows shortly. But first, let’s discuss ways to improve listening access.



(Getty Images)

Three specific areas where you can pragmatically improve your listening behavior are motivation, access, and skills.

3.2b Improving Listening Access

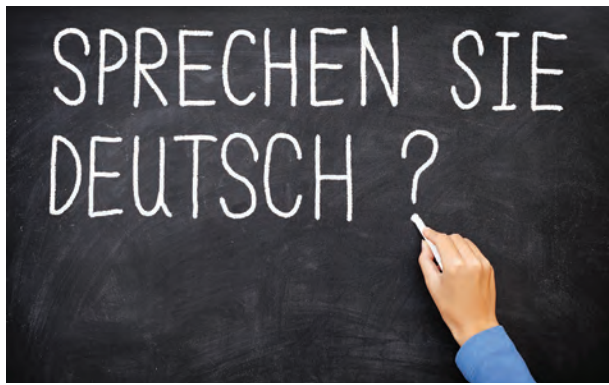
If the listening channel is blocked by physical noise, fatigue, or even a hearing deficiency, there are some obvious ways to clear the channel. Eliminate or move away from the noise, get some rest, move closer to the speaker, and/or see a hearing specialist.

The following are some clues indicating when hearing loss diminishes access:

1. Voices sound muffled.
2. Male voices seem clearer than female voices.
3. People assert that you’re not listening.
4. You frequently ask people to repeat themselves.

When the problem is language, as in our foreign student Hamza’s case, the answer is not as easy. Assuming Hamza’s reading of English is not equally deficient, he can start there. He should also seek out those campus support groups that work to improve language proficiency.

The language block is not restricted to foreign students. Chemistry has a language and a vocabulary of its own—as Rudy discovered. To clear the channel of such barriers you must learn the terminology to gain access to what’s being said. Reading is thought to be related to good listening, probably because it adds to your vocabulary, thereby giving you more meaningful access.⁸



(Shutterstock)

To clear the channel of barriers, you must learn the vocabulary to gain access to what's being said.

Finally, when the terminology of the speaker is unfamiliar and he has failed to provide explanations or definitions, good listening requires that you ask for clarification. Asking questions is part of the listening process as well as the learning process.

In review, you can improve your access to listening by managing or eliminating noise, avoiding fatigue, accommodating your hearing deficiencies, learning relevant language and vocabulary especially through reading, and asking for clarification.

3.2c Improving Listening Skills

There are several practical measures you can take to improve your overall listening skills. This area overlaps with motivation and access, so the following material should also help your efforts in those areas. We have also provided a listening self-assessment in the Appendix C. We encourage you to take the Listening Assessment before reading further as a way to investigate your own listening behaviors.



(Shutterstock)

Skillful note-taking helps you concentrate on what's important and provides a brief record of what you've heard.

Note-Taking

Recall that Ruth was confused after the lecture on primitive art. She was *motivated* to listen, and she had reasonable *access*, but her note-taking skills not only failed in function but also actually contributed to the cause of the confusion. Skillful note-taking helps you concentrate on what's important as well as serves as an intelligent, brief record of what you've heard.

Ruth's first mistake was trying to take down too much material (trying to listen for every word). That effort lasted

about one minute, and she was hopelessly behind. In her panic she switched styles and went to a partial sentence, abbreviated word style. When that failed, her notes became almost gibberish and her listening efficiency dropped to a frustrating zero.

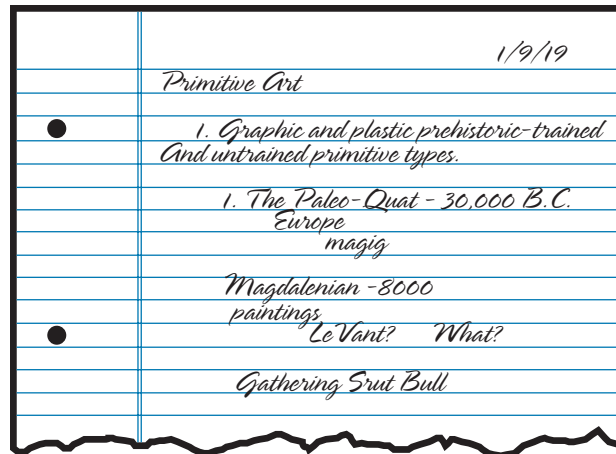
Ruth's note-taking would have been far less frustrating and her listening much improved if she had listened for ideas and facts, that is, main points and supporting data. Her notes would make more sense for review if subpoints were indented in a consistent manner. Having a system is the secret. Be consistent in form, note keywords—not everything you hear—and identify supporting evidence.

Of course, not all speakers are well organized, and nothing is more frustrating than trying to organize the unorganizable. It is sometimes advisable to first attempt to figure out what scheme a speaker is using and then adjust your note-taking accordingly. An important skill of a good listener is the ability to decipher the speaker's organization or figure out the organization that the speaker is attempting.

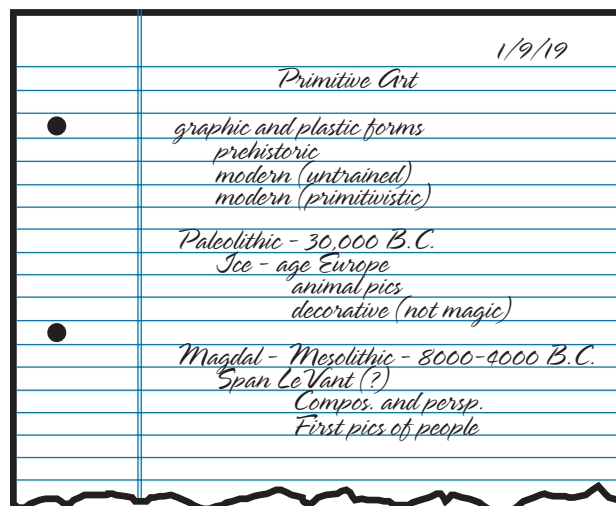
Managing Distractions

Distractions range from the physical that deny you listening access (noise, smell, vocabulary, etc.) to the intrapersonal that distort your ability to listen objectively. Some intrapersonal distractions may be a speaker whose personality, appearance, or manner upsets you enough to disrupt good listening; language that you consider substandard, inappropriate, or obscene; topical opposition that reaches a disruptive emotional level; and misinformation or erroneous beliefs.⁹

Training advice is hard to come by; even the listening experts resort to rules and admonishments in these matters. The assumption is that many people will manage distractions better if their bad habits are simply called to their attention.



Ruth's notes would make more sense if she had a consistent form.



Here are the notes of a more skillful notetaker and better listener.

3.3 Critical Thinking and Listening

One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears—by listening to them.

Dean Rusk,
former US Secretary of State

In 1993 David Koresh and the Branch Davidian cult believed that he was the Lamb mentioned in the Book of Revelation and that he could bring about the end of the world.¹⁰ According to the late Carl Sagan, 1994 surveys indicate that 25–50 percent of adult United States citizens didn't know the Earth goes around the sun once a year. A 2004 poll of adults aged 18 to 24 revealed that 27 percent expressed doubts that NASA went to the moon.¹¹

Bad Listening Habits

Below is a list of bad listening habits and suggested approaches to dealing with them.

1. *Overly criticizing the speaker.* Try to disregard a person's appearance or speech mannerisms and focus on the message they are trying to communicate instead.
2. *Avoiding new and challenging topics.* Some topics are difficult and complex. Instead of avoiding listening to them, try summarizing for yourself to increase your understanding or highlight concepts or terms to look up later.
3. *Calling the topic "stupid" or "uninteresting."* This is an avoidance technique that ultimately stops you from learning something you did not know or understand before. Work hard at relating the topic to something you do like or do find interesting.
4. *Prejudging.* Jumping to the conclusion that you understand the speaker's meaning before it is fully expressed can cause misunderstanding. Also, it often means you are preparing and rehearsing answers to questions or points before fully understanding them. Listen first to understand the message of the speaker. Jot a note
5. *Reacting emotionally.* Sometimes when you hear something that challenges your most deeply rooted prejudices, you become overstimulated emotionally. You mentally plan a rebuttal or develop questions designed to embarrass the speaker. Though emotionally loaded words may distract you, seek, yet again, to understand the message the speaker is trying to deliver. You need to understand before you can evaluate.
6. *Seeking distraction.* You look out the window for something, anything, that might be more interesting. You concentrate on another person who excites you, or you daydream, or actually cause distraction. Note your distraction and refocus on the speaker and her message. It helps to summarize the speaker's message for yourself or relate it directly to something you are familiar with.
7. *Faking attention.* You only pretend to listen, and your act gets pretty good. You smile, nod, blink, and so forth; you may even fool the speaker. That is why this bad habit is so cruel. You may be fooling (and cheating) both yourself and the speaker. Again, seek to be mindful and tune back in.

This lack of knowledge or lack of attention to our world continues today. According to a 2012 survey from the National Science Foundation on public attitudes and understanding of science and technology, one in four Americans believe the sun revolves around the Earth!¹² Are we just not listening or just not thinking?

The state of California has instituted a *critical thinking* requirement in its schools. California Executive Order number 338 reads as follows (emphasis ours):

Instruction in critical thinking is designed to *achieve an understanding of the relationship of language to logic*, which would lead to the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively, and to reach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief. The minimal competence to be expected at the successful conclusion of instruction in critical thinking should be *the ability to distinguish fact from judgment, belief from knowledge, and skills in elementary inductive and deductive processes*, including an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought.

Table 3.1 Ten Keys to Effective Listening

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL LISTENING	BAD LISTENING HABIT	GOOD LISTENING HABIT
1. Focus on what speakers say, not the way they say it	Overly criticizing the speaker	Thinking about the message; ignoring speechmaking mistakes
2. Push your mental limits	Avoiding new and challenging topics	Embracing intellectual difficulty as an opportunity for learning
3. Seek a reason to be interested	Calling the topic “stupid” or “uninteresting”	Working to relate the speech to something you find interesting
4. Hold off on judgment	Prejudging the speaker	Judging only once the speech is complete and you have understood it
5. Be open to the speaker’s language	Reacting emotionally to loaded words	Seeking to understand before you react and evaluate
6. Make an effort to listen	Pretending to pay attention	Active and energetic; striving to listen
7. Concentrate	Seeking out distractions	Noting your distractions and refocusing on the speaker’s message
8. Pay attention to the central themes	Focusing on facts	Focusing on ideas
9. Be adaptable	Trying to write everything down using just one note-taking method	Using a variety of note-taking systems adapted to the speaker’s style, keeping track of the main points and supporting ideas
10. Take advantage of your thought speed	Daydreaming during the speech	Thinking about the message, supporting ideas, and tone during pauses in the speech

Source: Adapted from “Your Personal Listening Profile,” by Sperry Corporation, 1980, *How Important it is to Listen*, p. 9. © Sperry Corporation.

In many ways the most difficult audience a speaker can engage is not what comedian, Steve Allen would refer to as *dumph*, his word for what he describes as an unprecedented form of mental incapacitation, or even a hostile audience but rather one that holds uninformed, erroneous beliefs, has little mind for facts, and prefers not to even think about reassessing them. It's a laid-back refusal to engage in any serious thinking or listening effort: "Don't confuse me with the facts; I'm happy with what I think."

What can you as *listeners* do to avoid these problems? First and foremost, you should strive to be better informed. You should also review how you know what you know or think you know. You should learn to suspend your laid-back demeanor long enough to hear what the word spinners are saying. Human beings are frequently wrong. Aristotle thought that male babies were conceived in a strong north wind!

Critical thinking can be defined as exercising intelligent, objective, cautious judgment and evaluation based on specific criteria. The following section provides areas we should be aware of when listening to and evaluating someone's message or argument with a critical mind.

... perhaps we are the only existing species capable of sustained logical thought, such thought does not come easy to us. Very few of us ever get very good at it—to most it remains difficult and even alien.

Leon Festinger,
Social psychologist

3.3a Interpretations of Chance Events

People hear satanic messages in garbled music. They make bets on the chanciest of data. They find acceptable prediction in astrology, which an increasing number of people in the US believe is scientific.¹³

A predisposition exists in all of us to seek order and meaning in even the most random of data. That is not all bad. It may lead to the solving of a crime or the discovery of a new star. But to see order in chance events when there is none becomes a real thinking trap. See if the events or data are indeed representative or ordered in some way.

Watch for invalid predictions or arguments based on chance events or random data. Poor thinking is often the result of a normal tendency to seek order in all things. People sometimes mistakenly find that order because they have not taken a critical look at the data.

3.3b Secondhand Information

"A reporter told me, based on reputable sources ... " We're really talking about thirdhand information here.

The further away you get from direct experience, the shakier the facts become. This is an ever-present problem since most of the messages you receive are indeed based on secondhand information. If you have ever played telephone, the game of passing along a message orally to see how much distortion takes place by the time it reaches the last person at your party, you have a good idea of what this critical thinking suggestion is all about.

Firsthand information "out of the horse's mouth" will be the most accurate.

3.3c Wishful Thinking

While listening to the campaign manager touting your favorite political candidate, you may overvalue the argument and overestimate your candidate's chance of winning. Most post-debate evaluations revealed that supporters all thought their candidate won the debate. There is nothing wrong with being an optimist or even engaging a considered bias as long as you can be objective.

However, if an assembly of like-minded people wants desperately to have its wishes fulfilled, an emergent group mentality may completely destroy critical thinking. Why else did hundreds of cult members commit mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978?

When your pre-existing beliefs are extremely strong, you may blindly accept new information and direction if it is consistent with those beliefs. New information that contradicts those beliefs is ignored or flatly rejected. The tendency to see and hear what you may desperately want to see and hear is a major threat to critical thinking and listening.

Ask yourself:

1. How biased or impartial am I on this topic?
2. Are the sources cited credible to detractors?
3. Are the arguments exaggerated?
4. Is the evidence relevant and adequate?
5. Are emotion and desire overwhelming my critical thinking?

The topics of *support*, *reasoning*, and *argument* will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.



3.3d Language Confusion

During the World War II Blitz in Great Britain, people wounded during the bombing were rushed to the nearest aid station where they were given first echelon treatment and then relayed to field hospitals. The War Department called these stations *evacuation hospitals*. Harsh criticism of these temporary treatment stations followed because of their “unhospital-like” treatment of patients. When the name was changed to *evacuation posts*, the criticism stopped.

Language is a wonderful thing. It can be used to express thoughts, to conceal thoughts, but more often, to replace thinking.

Kelly Fordyce

Your perceptions and thoughts are in large part at the mercy of your language. It becomes very clear that critical thinking suffers if you are not extremely careful about how you *decode* (make sense out of) and *encode* (imbue meaning into) your language. How you manage language is a large part of speaking, listening, and critical thinking. That is why an entire chapter is devoted to “Language Habits” (Chapter 8).

3.4 Speaker Responsibilities

We referred to *thought speed* earlier in the chapter. Since you can think much faster than you can speak, it is prudent for the speaker to use an energetic speech rate. This is not to say that speakers should sound like a machine gun, but too slow a rate does give listeners more free time to distract themselves.

As speakers, you are also responsible to a large extent for both attentive hearing and objective listening. An audience that is inattentive and half-asleep may not be *hearing* very efficiently because your voice or delivery pattern is dull and monotonous, or because your topic is poorly organized, poorly explained, or both.

The audience may not be *listening* for the same reasons. In trying to promote critical listening, the speaker has an ethical responsibility to avoid language confusion, reckless overgeneralizations (“They’re all yuppies,” “fascists,” “commies,” and so forth), irrelevant arguments, unrepresentative evidence, and attacking personalities.

A capable speaker needs to consider the total communication process (Figure 1.6) in trying to elicit good listening habits from her audience. Remind yourself that communication is a coactive, two-way process. Watch closely for feedback signs. Listeners usually let you know, one way or another, if you are not being understood or have been tuned out.

Chapter Review

Summary

Good listening does not guarantee success, but *poor* listening will stand in the way of its attainment. Good listening requires mindfulness, choosing to listen. People listen for different reasons and assume different styles of listening: *reluctant*, *appreciative*, *empathic*, *comprehensive*, *critical*, and *aggressive*.

Listening is a five-phase process that requires (1) *sensation*, (2) *selection*, (3) *interpretation*, (4) *evaluation*, and (5) *response*. Responses can be internal (intrapersonal) or external (feedback). The process is affected by environmental inputs as well as the speaker's message and also produces feedback. Interpretation is improved by better understanding perception and attribution theory.

Thought speed is the difference between the speed at which you think and the speed at which you talk. This empty time contributes to listening distractions. Basic areas for listening improvement are motivation, access, and skills. These three are interactional and interdependent. To improve *motivation* you can look for larger area of interests, relate the topic at hand to your own selfish interests, and translate the problem to an intellectual challenge.

Improving listening access can be accomplished by managing or eliminating *sensory distractions*, like noise; avoiding fatigue; accommodating your hearing deficiencies; learning relevant language and vocabulary, especially through reading; and asking for clarification.

You can improve your listening skills by learning the skills of keyword note-taking and of managing distractions. Note-taking should concentrate on ideas, main points, subpoints, facts, and evidence. Notes should be recorded in a consistent, systematic, brief manner and form.

Major listener distractions range from the physical (for example, noise) to the intrapersonal (for example, prejudgments). They include the speaker's appearance or manner, the speaker's language, topical opposition to the point of emotional disruption, and misinformation or erroneous beliefs.

Bad habits that distract you from efficient listening include overly criticizing the speaker, avoiding new and challenging topics, calling the topic stupid or uninteresting, prejudging, reacting emotionally, seeking distractions, and faking attention.

The following are ten "keys" or rules for successful listeners: focus on what speakers say, not the way they say it; push your mental limits; seek a reason to be interested; hold off on judgement; be open to the speaker's language; make an effort to listen; concentrate; pay attention to the central themes; be adaptable; and take advantage of your thought speed.

Critical thinking is exercising intelligent, objective, cautious judgment and evaluation based on specific criteria. Areas of influence that need to be recognized in order to improve critical thinking and listening are the following: how you interpret chance events, how you use secondhand information, the impact of wishful thinking, and language confusion.

Responsible speakers promote objective listening by avoiding language confusion, overgeneralization, irrelevant arguments, and personality attacks. Good speakers are alert to feedback and help audiences listen by adapting their speech material, mood, and mode of delivery to the total speech-making situation in which they find themselves.

To become more aware of your own listening habits, go to the Appendix and take our self-assessment quiz.

Key Terms

Aggressive A nonlistening style that serves to attack the message or person

Appreciative A passive listening approach for pleasure

Attribution Theory A means of understanding how and what we infer about the behaviors, attitudes, and intentions we observe or know, or think we know, in others and in ourselves

Back Channeling Nonverbal vocal expressions such as “Uh-huh” or “Hmm” that can encourage a speaker to continue

Comprehensive An active listening approach to understand the meaning in the message

Critical An evaluative listening approach that judges the message as acceptable or not

Discounting Effect The notion that a given cause should be discounted if other plausible causes are also present

Empathic A supportive listening approach to understand the feelings of another

Evaluation Deciding whether to accept or reject the message we have decoded

Interpretation Decoding the information in an attempt to make meaning of the message

Mindfulness Choosing to engage in the listening process

Nonverbal Feedback Facial expressions, body movements, back channeling, and other forms of unspoken response to a speaker

Reluctant A nonlistening approach when you feel you should listen but don't want to

Response The internal and external acknowledgement of understanding, acceptance, or rejection. Externally, this manifests in feedback or back channeling

Selection Choosing to listen to some things we can understand and not others that are foreign to us

Sensation First phase of the listening process: being physically present to the sound

Sensory Distraction Competing noises, smells, sights and sounds that decrease our ability to hear

Thought Speed The speed at which we think, as opposed to the speed at which we talk

Verbal Feedback Response to the speaker in the form of spoken feedback, such as questions or encouragements

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