The Listening Process

Hearing is one of the five senses. It’s your long-range sense. For example, you can hear a jet airliner or a helicopter approaching long before you see it.

Hearing is also the sense that gives you the most information. Find that hard to believe? Think about this: Suppose you’re sitting in your car. You’re stopped at a traffic light. You don’t have to look at the people in the car next to you to know what song they’re listening to on their radio. You can tell if that car is an SUV or a sports car just by the sound of its engine. And you don’t even need to keep an eye on the traffic light. You can tell when the cars start moving from the sound of tires on pavement. And maybe somebody honks—two quick and two long toots. You recognize that sound and wave to your friends in the car behind you.

You experience much of life through your sense of hearing. You continuously interpret what you hear by filtering out what’s important from background noise.

Quick Write

Stop for a moment. What do you hear? Think you can’t hear anything? Listen more closely! Concentrate on anything you can hear—no matter how small the sound. Write down a description of five things you hear.

Learn About

- the listening process
- the four types of listening
- the importance of listening
- myths about listening
- bad listening habits
- effective listening techniques
The Difference Between Listening and Hearing

Think about the last time you were standing on the corner waiting for a bus. You were listening for the sound it would make as it arrived. The sound would be an important cue. But if you were hanging out on that same corner with friends, you’d be focusing on your conversation with them. A bus might go by, but you wouldn’t even notice it. The roar of the bus would just be background noise. You would filter out the engine noise to listen to what your friends were saying.

These examples show the difference between listening and hearing. Hearing is continuous, unfocused, and unconscious. **Listening** is a focused, conscious, hearing activity. Listening is doing something.

The Need for Better Listening

Listening is the neglected communication skill. Most people have had instruction in reading, writing, and speaking, but few have had any formal instruction in listening. This void in education and training is especially interesting in light of research showing that most people spend nearly 50 minutes of every waking hour in some form of communication. Of these 50 minutes, 15 minutes are spent reading or writing, 10 minutes talking, and 25 minutes listening.

Think of it—people spend half their communication time listening, but few make a concerted effort to be better listeners. For those who do, however, the effort pays great dividends: higher productivity, faster learning, better jobs, more promotions, and improved relationships.

In some cases, listening determines people’s physical well-being—perhaps even whether they live or die.
The Four Types of Listening

You can become a better listener by understanding the four types of listening:

- Passive listening
- Competitive listening
- Active listening
- Reflective listening

**Passive listening** is one-way communication in which the receiver does not provide feedback and may or may not understand the sender’s message. Listening to the TV, a radio, or a teacher who doesn’t take questions is passive listening.

**Competitive listening** takes place when the receiver is not listening closely. You listen only long enough to get what you think is the necessary information. You’re already thinking about how you’re going to reply. You can hardly wait for a break in the conversation so that you can jump in. Competitive listening occurs when people “talk past” each other in an argument. Neither person is listening to the other.

**Active listening** is genuine, two-way communication. The receiver is paying full attention and thinking about the information. The receiver asks questions if he or she doesn’t understand the sender.

Active listening requires you to use effective listening and feedback techniques, including restating, paraphrasing, and asking for clarification. You’ll learn more about these techniques later in this lesson.

During **reflective listening**, the receiver not only actively listens to the speaker but also tries to interpret the speaker’s feelings. It involves the sense of sight as well as of hearing. This is because speakers often express feelings through gestures and body language. Good friends engage in reflective listening.

As the speaker or sender, you should try to communicate as clearly as you can. This will help ensure that the receiver understands your message. As an active listener or receiver, you can help the sender by providing feedback and asking for clarification. Don’t depend on the sender to do it all. Listen actively and confirm that you understand the message.
Speaking has some advantages over writing. When you speak, you have your audience members directly in front of you. You get immediate feedback from them. You can observe their *nonverbal cues*. These cues help you determine how they are receiving your message.

Positive nonverbal cues include leaning forward, nodding in agreement, smiling, and making eye contact with the speaker. Negative cues include leaning back, folding the arms, yawning, glancing at the clock, and looking around the room. If you see too many negative signs, you need to change your approach or your delivery. One way to do this is to pause and ask your listener for feedback. For example, ask, “What do you think?” or “Does that make sense?”

### The Importance of Listening

Failing to listen can be dangerous in many ways. If you don’t listen in class, your chances of getting a good grade are low. Failing to listen can affect your health, or even your life. Back at the traffic light mentioned earlier, you’d better start moving when the other cars do. And if the bus you were waiting for comes along, you’d better step out of its path. If you have a part-time job, you need to listen to the boss’s instructions. If not, you could damage some equipment. You might also get hurt.

How important is active listening? Consider this example.

A military jet was preparing for landing. The following radio conversation took place just before radio contact was lost, and the plane crashed into the side of a mountain, killing the pilot and co-pilot.

**CONTROL TOWER:** *Turn right. Keep your heading 180 degrees. Descend and maintain 8,000 feet.*

**PILOT:** *Right. Maintaining heading of 180 degrees. Am leaving 15,000 and heading for 2,000…. Steady at 180 degrees. Am passing 10,000 for 2,000.*

**CONTROL TOWER:** *Roger. Your position is 12 miles southwest of airport. Maintain 8,000 feet.*

**PILOT:** *Roger. Passing nine for two (that is, 9,000 for 2,000).*

**CONTROL TOWER:** *Your position is 19 miles southwest of airport. Turn right 200 degrees for a slight pattern extension.*

What happened? Who showed poor listening skills? Could this accident have been avoided with better listening?
Myths About Listening

People buy into a number of myths about listening. Below are some of the most common ones. How many of them have you heard before? What argument could you give to someone who believed them?

**Myth #1: Listening Is Not My Problem**

People generally overrate themselves as speakers. They assume that their listeners will understand. They need to realize that communication is a two-way street. Both speaker and listener need to work to make communication succeed.

**Myth #2: Listening and Hearing Are the Same**

Hearing is the reception of sound waves by your ears and your auditory nerves. Listening is the interpretation of those sound waves. Listening filters out noise and sounds that are not part of the message.

**Myth #3: Good Readers Are Good Listeners**

Both reading and listening depend on translating sounds into meaning. Because of this shared factor, many people think that good readers are always good listeners. This isn’t true. Research shows that there is little relationship between the average person’s scores for reading and listening. So even if you have trouble with reading, you can still be a good listener. And if you’re a great reader, you still might have to polish your listening skills.

**Myth #4: Smart People Are Better Listeners**

Students who score high on intelligence tests don’t always do well on listening tests. Smarter students do have the capacity to be better listeners than the average student. But a high intelligence may actually interfere with good listening.

**Myth #5: Listening Improves with Age**

The ability to listen and to understand does improve as people get older. For example, your younger brother or sister probably has a harder time understanding complicated things than you do. But although listening ability increases the older you get, listening performance declines. Several studies have shown that children are better listeners than adolescents. Young adolescents are better listeners than older ones. Most people become poorer listeners as they get older. You can tell your parents about that!
Myth #6: Listening Skills Are Hard to Learn

Good listening skills are not hard to learn. But applying those skills consistently does take practice.

Bad Listening Habits

You’ll learn more about effective listening techniques later in this lesson. But first, take a moment to think about the bad listening habits you may have picked up without realizing it.

Here are eight typical bad listening habits. See how many of these you find yourself slipping into. How can you avoid them to become a more effective listener?

Bad Habit #1: Thinking About What to Say Rather Than Listening to the Speaker

Whenever you converse with someone, you’re also carrying on an internal conversation—a conversation in your head. You’re trying to figure out where the external conversation is going. This distracts you from listening and can detract from the quality of your responses.

Bad Habit #2: Talking When You Should Be Listening

You’ve probably heard the old saying, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Americans are reared to speak their minds. Unfortunately, you miss a lot by talking when you should be listening. Pay attention to what people say. Hold your response until they have finished.

Bad Habit #3: Interrupting

Interrupters speak up before someone else has finished. They do this accidentally or deliberately. They believe that what they have to say is more important than what others have to say.

If you’ve ever been interrupted, you know how annoying it is. Train yourself to be patient. Let the other person talk. Nod and smile if you understand or agree. Shake your head and furrow your brow if you disagree. But never break in before the other person has finished. It’s not good manners to do that.
Bad Habit #4: Listening for What You Expect to Hear Rather Than What Is Actually Said

This bad habit is often more common in older people. It’s partly the result of being more experienced. As people grow up, they begin to formalize their ideas and opinions. Taken too far, this can lead to stereotyping and prejudging.

Your background, experiences, preferences, emotions, and fears can create a barrier between you and what someone might be trying to tell you.

Keep your mind open. Listen to what the other person is actually saying. Think about the subject from the other person’s point of view. Don’t filter it through your own experience. Ask questions.

Bad Habit #5: Being Preoccupied

The world is full of distractions. There’s always something to take your attention away from the matter at hand. Plans, worries, daydreams, fantasies, and memories intrude on your thinking. Strive to keep your mind on the topic at hand. If you find yourself preoccupied about something else while someone is talking, “bookmark” the topic by politely saying, “Oh, remind me to tell you about ________ later. You’ll get a kick out of it.” And then let the person continue speaking.

Bad Habit #6: Falling Victim to Stereotyping

Human beings like to categorize people, events, and things. It makes their lives easier. Presidential campaigns are a perfect example of how stereotyping works. Members of each party listen to the exact same words, but their party loyalty colors their thinking and closes off their ability to truly listen to what the other side has to say.

Men and women communicate differently, and research has shown they listen differently—which may be part of the reason people talk about men and women being from completely different planets! For example, men typically put statements in the form of commands, such as, “Park your car over there on the grass.” Women typically state things to create cooperation, as in “Let’s keep the driveway clear.”
Could you park over there on the grass?” As a result, men and women frequently misunderstand each other, stereotype the other gender, and never make an honest attempt to understand each other.

**Bad Habit #7: Being Self-centered**

Most people spend most of their time thinking about themselves rather than about others. This “me first” approach can interfere with listening. It’s probably not surprising that this can lead to other bad listening habits.

**Bad Habit #8: Not Paying Attention**

All the other bad habits stem from this one. To be a good listener, you must pay attention. “First, seek to understand,” the old advice goes. To understand, you must focus on the sender of the message. Watch for nonverbal cues as well. Give the other person assurances that you are listening.

**Effective Listening Techniques**

To be a good active listener, you must focus on what the speaker is saying. The following techniques can help you do this.

**Clarifying**

In clarifying, you ask specific questions to ensure you have understood the message.

**Example:** When you say the research paper is due on the 15th, do you mean in class or by the end of the day?

**Restating, Paraphrasing, or “Mirroring”**

In restating, paraphrasing, or mirroring, you use the speaker’s words or your own and repeat what you think the speaker has said. This will let the speaker verify that you have correctly understood.

**Example:** Did I understand you correctly? Did you say that classes would be canceled if the temperature falls below zero degrees Fahrenheit?

**Show You’re Listening**

- Nod if you agree, frown if you don’t.
- Smile at your sender.
- Make eye contact.
- Don’t fidget, rock, tap, bounce your leg, or look out the window.
- Ask questions.
- Give feedback, particularly if you don’t understand the message.
To be a good listener, focus on what the speaker is saying.

Acknowledging

Acknowledging is letting the speaker know that you have understood the message and that you appreciate the speaker’s point of view. It doesn’t mean that you necessarily agree. Your acknowledgment can be neutral.

Example: I appreciate the fact that you can’t attend every meeting. I realize that you live much farther from school than most students do.

Summarizing

Like restating, summarizing is a way to review progress in a conversation. You touch on the main ideas or conclusions, not on each individual point. You restate the main ideas briefly and set the tone for the next subject or conversation. This can be useful when you are discussing several issues.

Example: OK. We’ve agreed that I’ll work your shift on Thursday evening and you’ll work mine on Friday morning, right?
Framing can let you see whether the speaker is open to hearing your ideas. It can also let you draw suggested solutions from the speaker. Framing allows you to present information in a neutral way. You can then find areas of agreement on which to focus. Framing helps shape the conversation.

Example: I can see your point that we need new team equipment but that we won’t get it soon. Do you think we can make better use of what we have?

Note Taking

Nobody can remember everything a teacher or a speaker says. One solution is to take notes. Taking notes helps you listen actively and better remember what the speaker said.

In note taking, don’t try to write down every word a speaker says. If you take too many notes, you can’t listen. Just jot down words, phrases, diagrams, or the occasional sentence that will remind you of the speaker’s main points. Draw arrows and use bullet points.

Often your teacher will give you clues that something’s important. Here are some ways teachers do this:

- Reviewing at the beginning of class
- Writing something on the whiteboard
- Repeating information
- Using tone of voice and gestures to emphasize a point
- Giving word signals: “On one hand..., on the other hand”; “The first point is..., the second point is..., and the third point is....”
- Summarizing at the end of class

Suppose your teacher is talking about the Civil War and says, “Although it was a military stalemate with thousands of casualties, the Battle of Antietam or Sharpsburg was a victory for the Union. First, it turned back General Lee’s invasion of the North and his attempt to encircle Washington, D.C. Second, it allowed President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves in the Confederate states. This turned the war into a fight to end slavery, not just a dispute over states’ rights. Third, it helped persuade the British and French not to recognize the South as a separate country. This kept them from giving the Confederates any help.”
You might write down:

- **Antietam (Sharpsburg):** military stalemate, victory for Union
  1. Halted Lee’s invasion of North
  2. Lincoln issued Emancipation Proclamation, made war about ending slavery
  3. British and French did not recognize South as country or give help

You can use your notes to help you apply the listening techniques above. Read over your notes soon after you take them, while the speaker’s ideas are still fresh in your mind.
Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What is the difference between hearing and listening?
2. How much time do most people spend each hour talking or listening?
3. What kind of listening occurs when you’re watching TV?
4. What are some advantages of speaking over writing?
5. What are some ways failing to listen can be dangerous?
6. As people age, what happens to their listening ability and listening performance?
7. What are some of the things that can create a barrier between you and what someone might be trying to tell you?
8. What does it mean to “bookmark” a topic while someone else is talking?
9. What is clarifying in a conversation?
10. When you’re taking notes, what should you jot down?

**APPLYING YOUR LEARNING**

11. Monitor yourself over the next few hours. How much of your listening is competitive listening? Active listening? Reflective listening?