



Listening

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Most people need to think about listening in a new way.

- There's a difference between hearing and listening.
- Listening isn't a natural ability, and it takes effort and practice to do well.
- It's probable that people will hear the same message in different ways.

Two approaches can help you become a better listener:

- Minimize faulty listening behaviors
- Understand some of the reasons you listen poorly

Most people use one of four personal listening styles

- Content-oriented
- People-oriented
- Action-oriented
- Time-oriented

There are three ways to listen and respond:

- For information
- To critically evaluate a speaker's ideas
- To help others with their problems

In a world where almost everyone acknowledges the importance of better communication, the need for good listening is obvious. On the most basic level, listening is just as important as speaking. After all, it's impossible for communication to occur without someone receiving a message. (Imagine how ridiculous it would be to speak to an empty room or talk into a disconnected telephone.)

If frequency is a measure of importance, then listening easily qualifies as the most prominent kind of communication. We spend more time in listening to others than in any other type of communication. One study revealed that of their total communicating time, college students spent an average of 14 percent writing, 16 percent speaking, 17 percent reading, and a whopping 53 percent listening.¹ On the job, listening is by far the most common form of communication. On average, employees of major corporations in North America spend about 60 percent of each working day listening to others.²

Besides being the most frequent form of communication, listening is arguably just as important as speaking. When a group of adults was asked to identify the most important on-the-job communication skills, listening ranked at the top of the list. A study examining the link between listening and career success revealed that better listeners rose to higher levels in their organizations.³ A survey of personnel managers identified listening as the most critical skill for working effectively in teams.⁴ In small groups, other members view people who listen well as leaders.⁵ Listening is just as important in personal relationships. In one survey, marital counselors identified "failing to take the other's perspective when listening" as one of the most frequent communication problems in the couples with whom they work.⁶ When another group of adults was asked which communication skills were most important in family and social settings, listening was ranked first.⁷ In committed relationships, listening to personal information in everyday conversations is considered an important ingredient of satisfaction.⁸ For this reason, some theorists have argued that effective listening is an essential ingredient in effective relational communication.⁹

Despite the importance of listening, experience shows that much of the listening we and others do is not at all effective. We misunderstand others and are misunderstood in return. We become bored and feign attention while our minds wander. We engage in a battle of interruptions where each person fights to speak without hearing the other's ideas.

Some of this poor listening is inevitable, perhaps even justified. But in other cases we can be better receivers by learning a few basic listening skills. This chapter will help you become a better listener by giving you some important information about the subject. We'll talk about some common misconceptions concerning listening and show you what really happens when listening takes place. We'll discuss some poor listening habits, explain why they occur, and suggest better alternatives.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LISTENING

In spite of its importance, listening is misunderstood by most people. Because these misunderstandings so greatly affect our communication, we need to take a look at four common misconceptions that many communicators hold.

Listening and Hearing Are Not the Same Thing

Hearing is the process in which sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. **Listening** occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original

They call me the Speaker, but . . . they really ought to call me the Listener.

Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

I'll defend to the death your right to say that, but I never said I'd listen to it!

Tom Galloway

sound and then gives them meaning. Barring illness, injury, or earplugs, hearing can't be stopped. Your ears will pick up sound waves and transmit them to your brain whether you want them to or not. Listening, however, isn't automatic. Many times we hear but do not listen. Sometimes we deliberately tune out unwanted signals: everything from a neighbor's power lawn mower or the roar of nearby traffic to a friend's boring remarks or a boss's unwanted criticism.

A closer look at listening—at least the successful variety—shows that it consists of several stages. After hearing, the next stage is **attending**—the act of paying attention to a signal. An individual's needs, wants, desires, and interests determine what is attended to, or selected, to use the term introduced in Chapter 2.

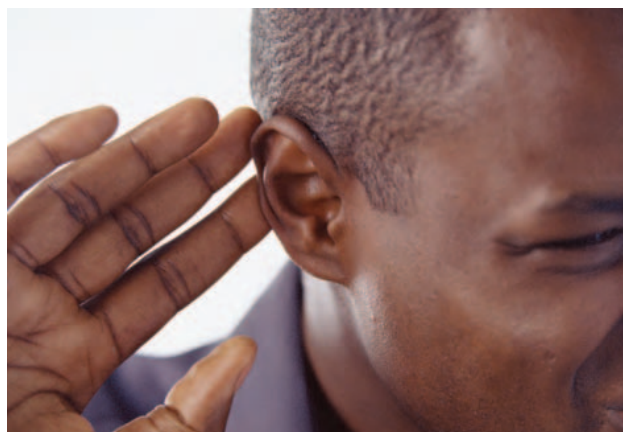
The next step in listening is **understanding**—the process of making sense of a message. Chapter 3 discussed many of the ingredients that combine to make understanding possible: a grasp of the syntax of the language being spoken, semantic decoding, and knowledge of the pragmatic rules that help you figure out a speaker's meaning from the context. In addition to these steps, understanding often depends on the ability to organize the information we hear into recognizable form. As early as 1948, Ralph Nichols related successful understanding to a large number of factors, most prominent among which were verbal ability, intelligence, and motivation.¹⁰

Responding to a message consists of giving observable feedback to the speaker. Offering feedback serves two important functions: It helps you clarify your understanding of a speaker's message, and it shows that you care about what that speaker is saying.

Listeners don't always respond visibly to a speaker—but research suggests that they should. One study of 195 critical incidents in banking and medical settings showed that a major difference between effective listening and ineffective listening was the kind of feedback offered.¹¹ Good listeners showed that they were attentive by nonverbal behaviors such as keeping eye contact and reacting with appropriate facial expressions. Their verbal behavior—answering questions and exchanging ideas, for example—also demonstrated their attention. It's easy to imagine how other responses would signal less effective listening. A slumped posture, bored expression, and yawning send a clear message that you are not tuned in to the speaker.

Adding responsiveness to our listening model demonstrates the fact, discussed in Chapter 1, that communication is transactional in nature. Listening isn't just a passive activity. As listeners we are active participants in a communication transaction. At the same time that we receive messages we also send them.

The final step in the listening process is **remembering**.¹² Research has revealed that people remember only about half of what they hear *immediately after* hearing it.¹³ This is true even if people work hard at listening. This situation would probably not be too bad if the half remembered right after were retained, but it isn't. Within two months half of the half is forgotten, bringing what we remember down to about 25 percent of the original message. This loss, however, doesn't take two months: People start forgetting immediately (within eight hours the 50 percent remembered drops to about 35 percent). Given the amount of information we process every day—from instructors, friends, the radio, TV, and



I can't help hearing, but I don't always listen.

George Burns

CULTURAL IDIOM

tune out: not listen

tuned in: focused, paying attention



UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

TELEVISION AND POOR LISTENING

Research published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* has reveals that preschoolers who watch more than an hour of television daily risk developing attention deficit problems later in life. The study examined the viewing habits and cognitive abilities of 1,345 children, ages 1 and 3. Parents recorded the children's TV viewing habits, and then rated their behavior at age 7 on a scale similar to one used to diagnose attention deficit disorders.

Children who watched one to two hours per day had a 10 percent to 20 percent increased risk of attention problems, compared to those who watched less than an hour of TV daily. The children who watched three to four hours daily had a 30 percent to 40 percent increased risk compared with

children who watched no TV. These results fit with earlier research showing that TV can shorten attention spans, and it supports the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations that youngsters under age two not watch television.

The researchers concluded that the content of programs probably isn't what causes thinking problems. Instead, they believe that the rapid-fire visual images common in children's TV programming may overstimulate and permanently "rewire" the developing brain.

Dimitri A. Christakis, Frederick J. Zimmerman, David L. DiGiuseppe, and Carolyn A. McCarty, "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children," *Pediatrics* 113 (2004): 708–713.

other sources—the **residual message** (what we remember) is a small fraction of what we hear.

Listening Is Not a Natural Process

Another common myth is that listening is like breathing: a natural activity that people do well. The truth is that **listening is a skill much like speaking**: Everybody does it, though few people do it well. One study illustrates this point: 144 managers in a study were asked to rate their listening skills. Astonishingly, not one of the managers described himself or herself as a "poor" or "very poor" listener, whereas 94 percent rated themselves as "good" or "very good."¹⁴ The favorable self-ratings contrasted sharply with the perceptions of the managers' subordinates, many of whom said their boss's listening skills were weak. As we have already discussed, some poor listening is inevitable. The good news is that listening **can be improved through instruction and training**.¹⁵ Despite this fact, the amount of time devoted to teaching listening is far less than that devoted to other types of communication. Table 4-1 reflects this upside-down arrangement.

TABLE 4-1 Comparison of Communication Activities

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Learned	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Used	Most	Next to most	Next to least	Least
Taught	Least	Next to least	Next to most	Most

Listening Requires Effort

Most people assume that listening is fundamentally a passive activity in which the receiver absorbs a speaker's ideas, rather the way a sponge absorbs water. As you will soon read, every kind of listening requires mental effort by the receiver. And experience shows that passive listening almost guarantees that the respondent will fail to grasp at least some of the speaker's ideas and misunderstand others.

All Listeners Do Not Receive the Same Message

When two or more people are listening to a speaker, we tend to assume that they all are hearing and understanding the same message. In fact, such uniform comprehension isn't the case. Recall the discussion of perception in Chapter 2, where we pointed out the many factors that cause each of us to perceive an event differently. Physiological factors, social roles, cultural background, personal interests, and needs all shape and distort the raw data we hear into uniquely different messages.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Despite the importance of good listening, people seem to get worse at the skill as they grow older.¹⁶ Teachers at various grade levels were asked to stop their lectures periodically and ask students what they were talking about. Ninety percent of first-grade children could repeat what the teacher had been saying, and 80 percent of the second-graders could do so; but when the experiment was repeated with teenagers, the results were much less impressive. Only 44 percent of junior high students and 28 percent of senior high students could repeat their teachers' remarks.

Research suggests that adults listen even more poorly—at least in some important relationships. One experiment found that people listened more attentively and courteously to strangers than to their spouses. When faced with decision-making tasks, couples interrupted one another more frequently and were generally less polite than they were to strangers.¹⁷

What kinds of poor listening habits plague communication? To find out, read on.

Faulty Listening Behaviors

Although we can't listen effectively all the time, most people possess one or more habits that keep them from understanding truly important messages.

PSEUDOLISTENING Pseudolistening is an imitation of the real thing. Pseudolisteners give the appearance of being attentive: They look you in the eye, nod and smile at the right times, and even may answer you occasionally. Behind that appearance of interest, however, something entirely different is going on, because pseudolisteners use a polite facade to mask thoughts that have nothing to do with what the speaker is saying.

SELECTIVE LISTENING Selective listeners respond only to the parts of a speaker's remarks that interest them, rejecting everything else. All of us are se-



Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf.

Heraclitus



Source: PEANUTS reprinted by permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

lective listeners from time to time as, for instance, when we screen out media commercials and music while keeping an ear cocked for a weather report or an announcement of time. In other cases, selective listening occurs in conversations with people who expect a thorough hearing but get their partner's attention only when the conversation turns to the partner's favorite topic—perhaps money, sex, a hobby, or some particular person. Unless and until you bring up one of these pet topics, you might as well talk to a tree.

DEFENSIVE LISTENING **Defensive listeners** take innocent comments as **personal attacks**. Teenagers who perceive parental questions about friends and activities as distrustful snooping are defensive listeners, as are insecure breadwinners who explode when their mates mention money and touchy parents who view any questioning by their children as a threat to their authority and parental wisdom. Many defensive listeners are suffering from shaky public images and avoid admitting this by projecting their insecurities onto others.

AMBUSHING **Ambushers** listen carefully, but only because they are collecting information to attack what you have to say. The cross-examining prosecution attorney is a good example of an ambusher. Using this kind of strategy will justifiably initiate defensiveness on the other's behalf.

INSULATED LISTENING **Insulated listeners** are almost the opposite of their selective-listening cousins. Instead of looking for something specific, these people avoid it. Whenever a topic arises they'd rather not deal with, insulated listeners simply fail to hear it or, rather, to acknowledge it. If you remind them about a problem—perhaps an unfinished job, poor grades, or the like—they'll nod or answer you and then promptly forget what you've just said.

CULTURAL IDIOM

keeping an ear cocked: listening alertly

pet: favorite

breadwinners: those who support their families with their earnings

at face value: literally

INSENSITIVE LISTENING **Insensitive listeners** are the final example of people who don't receive another person's messages clearly. People often don't express their thoughts or feelings openly but instead communicate them through subtle and unconscious choice of words or nonverbal clues or both. **Insensitive listeners** aren't able to look beyond the words and behavior to understand their hidden meanings. Instead, they take a speaker's remarks at face value.

STAGE HOGGING **Stage hogs** (sometimes called "conversational narcissists") try to turn the topic of conversations to themselves instead of showing interest in the

speaker.¹⁸ Interruptions are a hallmark of stage hogging. Besides preventing the listener from learning potentially valuable information, stage hogging can damage the relationship between the interrupter and the speaker. For example, applicants who interrupt the questions of an employment interviewer are likely to be rated less favorably than job seekers who wait until the interviewer has finished speaking before they respond.¹⁹

When confronted with stage hogs, people respond in one of two ways. Sometimes the strategy is passive: talking less, tuning out the speaker, showing boredom nonverbally, and leaving the conversation. Other strategies are more active: trying to recapture the floor, hinting about the stage hog's dominance, or confronting the speaker about his or her narcissism. Reactions like these give stage hogs a taste of their own medicine, turning the conversation into a verbal tug-of-war.

Reasons For Poor Listening

What causes people to listen poorly? There are several reasons, some of which can be avoided and others that are sad but inescapable facts of life.

EFFORT Listening effectively is hard work. The physical changes that occur during careful listening show the effort it takes: Heart rate quickens, respiration increases, and body temperature rises.²⁰ Notice that these changes are similar to the body's reaction to physical effort. This is no coincidence, because listening carefully to a speaker can be just as taxing as more obvious efforts. You can manage the effort that's required to listen well if you prepare yourself for the task. If you know that passive listening won't be enough, you can invest the energy to understand others.

MESSAGE OVERLOAD The amount of speech most of us encounter every day makes careful listening to everything we hear impossible. As we've already seen, many of us spend as much as one-third of the time we're awake listening to verbal messages—from teachers, coworkers, friends, family, salespeople, and total strangers. This means we often spend five hours or more a day listening to people talk. If you add this to the amount of time we tune in radio and television, you can see that it's impossible for us to keep our attention totally focused for that amount of time. Therefore, we have to let our attention wander at times. If you can consciously decide which messages are worth your attention, you can devote the time it takes to understand them.

RAPID THOUGHT Listening carefully is also difficult for a physiological reason. Although we are capable of understanding speech at rates up to 600 words per minute, the average person speaks between 100 and 140 words per minute.²¹ Thus, we have a great deal of mental "spare time" to spend while someone is talking. And the temptation is to use this time in ways that don't relate to the speaker's ideas, such as thinking about personal interests, daydreaming, planning a rebuttal, and so on. The trick is to use this spare time to understand the speaker's ideas better rather than to let your attention wander. Try to rephrase the speaker's ideas in your own words. Ask yourself how the ideas might be useful to you. Consider other angles that the speaker might not have mentioned.

CULTURAL IDIOM

tuning out: not listening

a taste of their own medicine: retaliating by responding in a similar manner

tug-of-war: contest or struggle

Easy listening is a style of music, not communication.

Harvey Mackay

CULTURAL IDIOM

charade: pretense

PSYCHOLOGICAL NOISE Another reason why we don't always listen carefully is that we're often wrapped up in personal concerns that are of more immediate importance to us than the messages others are sending. It's hard to pay attention to someone else when you're anticipating an upcoming test or thinking about the wonderful time you had last night with good friends. Yet, we still feel we have to "listen" politely to others, and so we continue with our charade. It usually takes a conscious effort to set aside your personal concerns if you expect to give others' messages the attention they deserve.

Figure 4-1 illustrates four ways in which preoccupied listeners lose focus when distracted by psychological noise. Everyone's mind wanders at one time or another, but excessive preoccupation is both a reason for and a sign of poor listening.

PHYSICAL NOISE The world in which we live often presents distractions that make it hard to pay attention to others. The sound of traffic, music, others' speech,

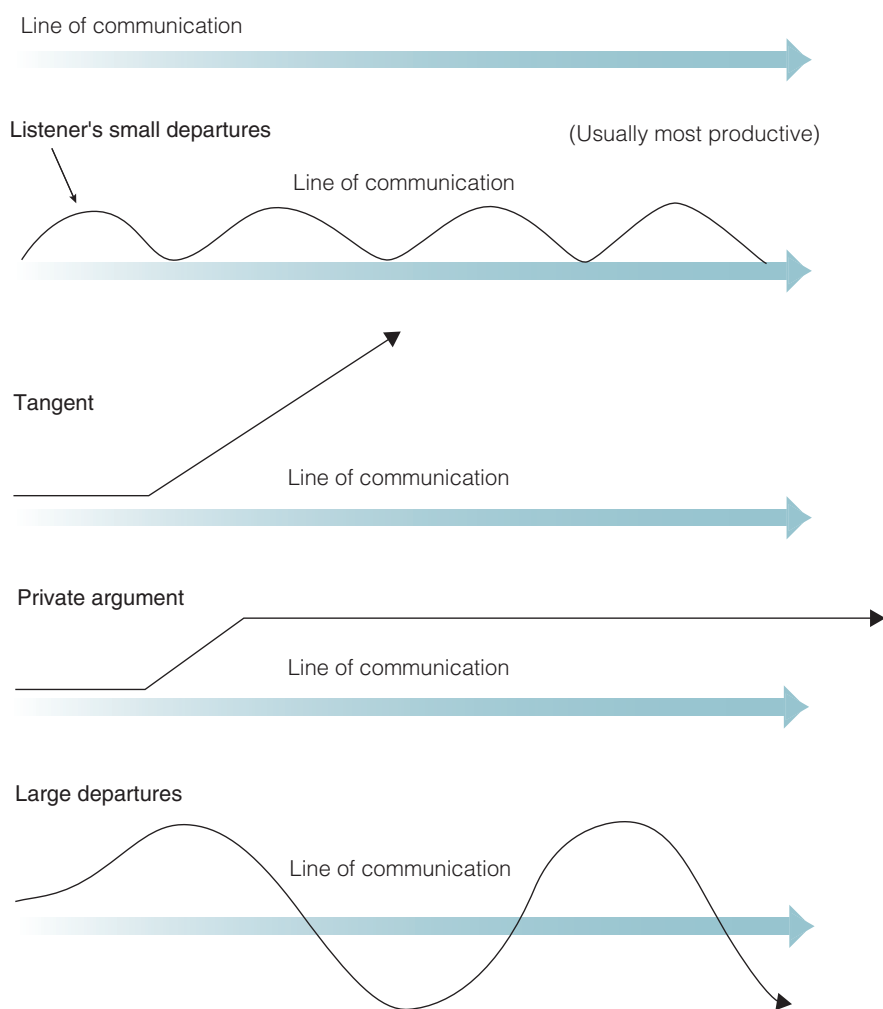


Figure 4-1 Four Thought Patterns. Source: A. D. Wolvin and C. G. Coakley, *Perspectives on Listening* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993), p. 115.



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

DEAFNESS LITE

So slight is the bereftness of my belated ear-fault
that “Deafness Lite” became the name that I call it.

In a simpler word: things heard are blurred
on the left as well (or as weakly) as right.
Neither half’s loss is a matter too drastic
both partly “cured” by batteries in plastic.

But if eyeing such signs of silence, Hearer,
or (harder to do) spying a less visible clue
try, by turning your speech slow and clearer
to reach those few who must communicate anew.

And so
that is why
as their advocate I
ask you unafflicted this:
Make me your talking’s target
and practice, practice, practice.
Address then the wise assistive eyes
of sisters and brothers with hindered ear
and so come to know, then to de-stranger-ize
those kindred other souls who less than I can hear.

Repeat. Reword. For patience may reward your
self, not by some sense of the charity kind
but by sharing the very daringest adventure:
eyes meeting eyes and mind mating with mind.

Sal Parlato, Jr.

and the like interfere with our ability to hear well. Also, fatigue or other forms of discomfort can distract us from paying attention to a speaker’s remarks. Consider, for example, how the efficiency of your listening decreases when you are seated in a crowded, hot, stuffy room that is surrounded by traffic and other noises. In such circumstances even the best intentions aren’t enough to ensure clear understanding. You can often listen better by insulating yourself from outside distractions. This may involve removing the sources of noise: turning off the television, shutting the book you were reading, closing the window, and so on. In some cases, you and the speaker may need to find a more hospitable place to speak in order to make listening work.

HEARING PROBLEMS Sometimes a person’s listening ability suffers from a hearing problem—the most obvious sort of physiological noise, as defined in Chapter 1. After a hearing problem has been diagnosed, it’s often possible to treat it. The real tragedy occurs when a hearing loss goes undetected. In such cases, both the person with the defect and others can become frustrated and annoyed at the ineffective communication that results. If you suspect that you or someone you know suffers from a hearing loss, it’s wise to have a physician or audiologist perform an examination.

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS We often give others a mental brush-off because we assume their remarks don’t have much value. When one business consultant asked some of her clients why they interrupted colleagues, she received the following responses:

My idea is better than theirs.

If I don’t interrupt them, I’ll never get to say my idea.

CULTURAL IDIOM

give...brush-off: to dismiss or not pay attention to

CULTURAL IDIOM**rule out:** fail to consider**wit:** a clever conversationalist**grab the stage:** gain attention

I know what they are about to say.

They don't need to finish their thoughts since mine are better.

Nothing about their idea will improve with further development.

It is more important for me to get recognized than it is to hear their idea.

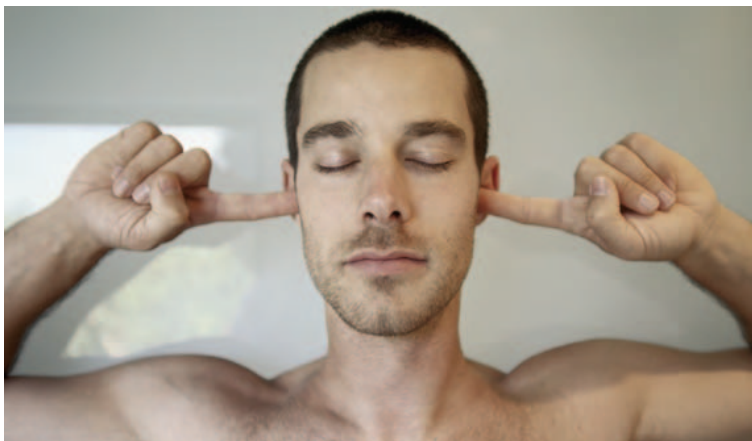
I'm more important than they are.²²

The egotism behind these comments is stunning. Dismissing others' ideas before considering them may be justified *sometimes*, but it's obviously a mistake to rule out so much of what others say . . . especially when you consider how you would feel if other people dismissed your comments without hearing you out.

TALKING HAS MORE APPARENT ADVANTAGES It often appears that we have more to gain by speaking than by listening. Whatever the goal—to have a prospective boss hire you, to convince others to vote for the candidate of your choice, or to describe the way you want your hair cut—the key to success seems to be the ability to speak well. Another apparent advantage of speaking is the chance it provides to gain the admiration, respect, or liking of others—or so you may think. Tell jokes, and everyone may think you're a real wit. Offer advice, and they might be grateful for your help. Tell them all you know, and they could be impressed by your wisdom.

Although speaking at the right time can lead people to appreciate you, talking too much can result in the kind of stage hogging described on pages 120–121. Not all interruptions are attempts at stage hogging. One study revealed a difference between male and female interrupters.²³ Men typically interrupted conversations far more than women. Their goal was usually to control the discussion. Women interrupted for very different reasons: to communicate agreement, to elaborate on the speaker's idea, or to participate in the topic of conversation. These sorts of responses are more likely to be welcomed as a contribution to the conversation and not as attempts to grab the stage.

If you find yourself hogging the conversation, try a simple experiment. Limit the frequency and length of your responses to a fraction of their usual amount. If you were speaking 50 percent of the time, cut back to 25 percent—or even less. If you interrupt the speaker every fifteen seconds, try to let him or her talk for





WHAT GOOD IS FREE SPEECH IF NO ONE LISTENS?

It is the law in this country, as in no other, that the individual has an extraordinary right to personal expression. The First Amendment to the Constitution protects the right to speak and to publish; these rights and the degree to which they are safeguarded are the distinguishing characteristics of American society.

For that we have only the courts to thank. Americans seem to be almost completely uninterested in any point of view other than their individual own. We are absolutely up to our necks in groups and blocs and religious and economic interests certain beyond all reason that they are correct and actively interested in imposing their rules and values and self-selected morals on the rest of us. They prattle about democracy, and use it when it suits them without the slightest regard or respect for what it means and costs and requires. These people are—please believe me—dangerous.

The right to speak is meaningless if no one will listen, and the right to publish is not worth having if no one will read. It is simply not enough that we reject censorship and will not countenance suppression; we have an affirmative responsibility to hear the argument before we disagree with it.

I think that you think that you agree with me, that you are fair and open-minded and good citizens. But if we put it to the

test—if I make up some speeches about gun control, abortion, gay rights, racial and ethnic characteristics, political terrorism and genocide—I believe that I can make you boo and jeer or at least walk out in protest.

We cannot operate that way. It's not difficult to listen to the philosophy you agree with or don't care about. It's the one that galls that must be heard. No idea is so repugnant that it must not be advocated. If we are not free to speak heresy and utter awful thoughts, we are not free at all. And if we are unwilling to hear that with which we most violently disagree, we are no longer citizens but have become part of the mob.

Nowhere is the willingness to listen more important than at a university, and nowhere is our failure more apparent than at the university whose faculty members or students think that it's legitimate to parade their own moral or political purity by shouting down the unpopular view of the day.

It will not be a week, and certainly not a month, before you will become aware that someone in your own circle of influence is saying something or thinking something very wrong. I think you have to do something about that. I think you have to help them be heard. I think you are required to listen.

Kurt Luedtke

closer to a minute. You are likely to discover that you're learning more—and probably gaining the appreciation of the other person.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES The way members of different cultures communicate can affect listening.²⁴ For instance, one study of young adults in various countries showed marked differences in listening preferences. Young Germans favored an action-oriented approach: They engaged speakers directly and were highly inquisitive. This style contrasts with the indirect approach of high-context Japanese listeners. Young Israelis were also less vocal than Germans and focused on careful analysis of others' statements. By contrast, young Americans emphasized the social dimension of a conversation and were more focused on how much time a conversation was taking.

MEDIA INFLUENCES A final challenge to serious listening is the influence of contemporary mass media, especially television and radio. A growing amount of programming consists of short segments: news items, commercials, music videos, and so on. (Think of *Sesame Street* and MTV.) In the same vein, news stories (for example, *USA Today* and the television news) consist of brief stories with a declining portion of text and a growing amount of graphical information. These trends discourage the kind of focused attention that is necessary for careful listening, especially to complicated ideas and feelings.

While the right to talk may be the beginning of freedom, the necessity of listening is what makes that right important.

Walter Lippmann

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

HOW CAREFULLY SHOULD YOU LISTEN?

What responsibility do communicators have to listen as carefully and thoughtfully as possible? Are there ever cases where we are justified in pseudolistening? Stage hogging? Defensive listening? Selective attention? Responding defensively? Ambushing? Insensitivity?

Is it dishonest to fake careful listening when you are not doing so, or do communicators have an obligation to confess that they are not listening? How would you feel if you knew others weren't listening to you?

PERSONAL LISTENING STYLES

Not everyone listens the same way. Communication researchers have identified four styles, each of which has both strengths and weaknesses.²⁵

Content-Oriented

As the label that characterizes them suggests, **content-oriented listeners** are most interested in the quality of messages they hear. They want to seek details and are good at analyzing an issue from several perspectives. They give weight to the messages of experts and other credible sources of information. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy ideas for their own sake and are willing to spend time exploring them in thorough exchanges of ideas.

A content-oriented approach is valuable when the goal is to evaluate the quality of ideas and when there is value in looking at issues from a wide range of perspectives. It is especially valuable when the topic is a complicated one. On the other hand, a content-oriented approach risks annoying people who don't have the same sort of analytical orientation. A content-oriented approach can take more time than others may be willing to give, and the challenging of ideas that comes with it can be perceived as overly critical or even hostile.

People-Oriented



People-oriented listeners are especially concerned with creating and maintaining positive relationships. They tune into others' moods, and they respond to speakers' feelings as well as their ideas. People-oriented listeners are typically less judgmental about what others have to say than are content-oriented types: They are more interested in understanding and supporting people than in evaluating them.²⁶

A people orientation has obvious strengths. But a strong concern for relationships has some less obvious drawbacks. It is easy to become overly involved with others' feelings. People-oriented listeners may lose their detachment and ability to assess the quality of information others are giving in an effort to be congenial and supportive. Less personally oriented communicators can view them as overly expressive and even intrusive.

CULTURAL IDIOM

give weight to: give priority to
tune into: pay attention to

Action-Oriented

Unlike people-oriented listeners, who focus on relationships, and content-oriented listeners, who are fascinated with ideas for their own sake, **action-oriented**

listeners are most concerned with the task at hand. Their main concern is to figure out what sort of response is required by a message. They want to get to the heart of the matter quickly, and so they appreciate clear, concise messages and often translate others' remarks into well-organized mental outlines.

Action-oriented listening is most appropriate when taking care of business is the primary concern: Such listeners keep a focus on the job at hand and encourage others to be organized and concise. But their no-nonsense approach isn't always appreciated by speakers who lack the skill or inclination to be clear and direct. Action-oriented listeners seem to minimize emotional issues and concerns, which may be an important part of business and personal transactions.

Time-Oriented

Time-oriented listeners are most concerned with efficiency. They view time as a scarce and valuable commodity. They grow impatient when they view others as wasting it. A time orientation can be an asset when deadlines and other pressures demand fast action. On the other hand, a time orientation can put off others when it seems to disregard their feelings. Also, an excessive focus on time can hamper the kind of thoughtful deliberation that some jobs require.

As you read the preceding descriptions, you may have found that you use more than one of the listening styles. If so, you aren't alone: 40 percent of the people who have used this instrument indicate at least two strong listening preferences.²⁷ Whichever styles you use, it is important to recognize that you can control the way you listen and to use the styles that best suit the situation at hand. When your relationship with the speaker needs attention, adopt a people-oriented approach. When clarity is the issue, be an action-oriented listener. If analysis is called for, put on your content-oriented persona. And when the clock is what matters most, become a model of time orientation. You can also boost your effectiveness by assessing the listening preferences of your conversational partners and adapting your style to them.

INFORMATIONAL LISTENING

Informational listening is the approach to take when you want to understand another person. When you are an informational listener, your goal is to make sure you are receiving the same thoughts the other person is trying to convey—not always an easy feat when you consider the forces listed on pages 121–125 that interfere with understanding.

The situations that call for informational listening are endless and varied: following an instructor's comments in class, listening to a friend's account of a night on the town, hearing a description of a new piece of equipment that you're thinking about buying, learning about your family history from a relative's tales,

CULTURAL IDIOM

put off: displease

Learn to listen. Opportunity could be knocking at your door very softly.

Frank Tyger

The Chinese characters that make up the verb “to listen” tell us something significant about this skill.



Calligraphy by Angie Au



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

COUNCIL: REVIVING THE ART OF LISTENING

Not too long ago, before our ears became accustomed to an increasing barrage of stimulation, many people knew how to listen attentively, while tracking an animal or hearing the approach of rain—or sitting in council with a group of their peers.

We know of no more effective way to invoke this state of listening than in what we have come to call the “council process.” The origin of this process can be traced to the League of the Iroquois (which had a powerful influence on the beginnings of our present governmental system) and the peoples of the plains and of the Southwestern pueblos. More recently, the traditional practice of council has emerged in contemporary form through the Native American Church. The roots of council also can be found in Homer’s *Iliad*, where a talking wand was used by a gathering of men to resolve the bitter dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon.

As we have practiced it, the basic form of council is simple. In order to empower each person to speak in turn, a “talking” object or “stick” is chosen to be passed around the circle—traditionally clockwise, in the “sun direction.” The talking stick can be as innocent as a flower just picked for the occasion or as venerable as a traditional hand-crafted artifact familiar to the group. Many councils that meet regularly use

the same object over a period of months or even years, so that it becomes a symbol of the group’s integrity and its capability for spirited communication.

We often set three simple rules for council: Speak honestly, be brief, and listen from the heart. One of the great challenges is to not be thinking about what you’re going to say until it’s your turn to speak. Preparing your contribution before you receive the talking stick obviously diminishes its spontaneity and its responsiveness to what others have said. A good practice is to wait until the talking stick is in your hands and then pause to see what springs to mind. Often we are surprised at the humor, tears, wisdom, or vision that comes forth.

We share the concern many people have today about the superficial “playing Indian”—that is, the appropriation of another culture’s traditions. We want to acknowledge how much we have learned from the teachings of Native American peoples and our own ancestors. Council for us is a spiritual practice growing out of all our history, and a practice in which we seek to express these roots in a contemporary context.

Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle
The Way of Council

swapping ideas in a discussion about religion or politics—the list goes on and on. You can become more effective as an informational listener by approaching others with a constructive attitude and by using some simple but effective skills.



Don’t Argue or Judge Prematurely

Ever since ancient Greece and later Rome, Western civilization has admired the ability to persuade others.²⁸ This tradition has led us to measure the success of much communication in terms of whether it changes the way others think and act. Recall, for example, what often happens when people encounter someone with differing opinions. Rather than try to understand one another, their conversation often turns into an argument or debate (sometimes friendly, and sometimes not) in which the participants try to change one another’s minds.

Persuasion is certainly one important goal of communication, but it isn’t the only one. Most people would agree with the principle that it’s essential to understand a speaker’s ideas before judging them. Despite this commonsense fact, all of us are guilty of forming snap judgments, evaluating others before hearing them out. This tendency is greatest when the speaker’s ideas conflict with our own.

We can communicate an idea around the world in seventy seconds but it sometimes takes years for an idea to get through ¼ inch of human skull.

Charles Kettering
inventor and General Motors executive

It's especially tempting to counterattack when others criticize you, even when those criticisms might contain valuable truths and when understanding them might lead to a change for the better. Even if there is no criticism or disagreement, we tend to evaluate others based on sketchy first impressions, forming snap judgments that aren't at all valid. Not all premature judgments are negative. It's also possible to jump to overly favorable conclusions about the quality of a speaker's remarks when we like that person or agree with the ideas being expressed. The lesson contained in these examples is clear: **Listen first. Make sure you understand. Then evaluate or argue, if you choose.**

CULTURAL IDIOM

write off: dismiss as worthless or unimportant

Separate the Message from the Speaker

The first recorded cases of blaming the messenger for an unpleasant message occurred in ancient Greece. When messengers would arrive reporting losses in battles, their generals were known to respond to the bad news by having the messengers put to death. This sort of irrational reaction is still common (though fortunately less violent) today. Consider a few situations in which there is a tendency to get angry with a communicator bearing unpleasant news: An instructor tries to explain why you did poorly on a major paper; a friend explains what you did to make a fool of yourself at the party last Saturday night; the boss points out how you could do your job better. At times like this, **becoming irritated with the bearer of unpleasant information not only can cause you to miss important information, but also can harm your relationships.**

There's a second way that confusing the message and the messenger can prevent you from understanding important ideas. At times **you may mistakenly discount the value of a message because of the person who is presenting it.** Even the most boring instructors, the most idiotic relatives, and the most demanding bosses occasionally make good points. If you write off everything a person says before you consider it, you may be cheating yourself out of some valuable information.

Be Opportunistic

Even if you listen with an open mind, sooner or later you will end up hearing information that is either so unimportant or so badly delivered that you're tempted to tune out. Although making a quick escape from such tedious situations is often the best thing to do, **there are times when you can profit from paying close attention to apparently worthless communication.** This is especially true when you're trapped in a situation where the only alternatives to attentiveness are pseudolistening or downright rudeness.

As an opportunistic listener you can **find** some value in even the worst situations, if you are willing to invest the effort. Consider how you might listen opportunistically when you find yourself locked in a boring conversation with someone whose ideas are worthless. Rather than torture yourself until escape is possible, you could keep yourself amused—and perhaps learn something useful—by listening carefully until you can answer the following (unspoken) questions:

“Is there anything useful in what this person is saying?”

“What led the speaker to come up with ideas like these?”

“What lessons can I learn from this person that will keep me from sounding the same way in other situations?”

There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject. There are only uninterested people.

G. K. Chesterton



Listening with a constructive attitude is important, but even the best intentions won't always help you understand others. The following skills can help you figure out messages that otherwise might be confusing, as well as help you see how those messages can make a difference in your life.

Look for Key Ideas

It's easy to lose patience with long-winded speakers who never seem to get to the point—or have a point, for that matter. Nonetheless, most people do have a central idea, or what we will call a “thesis” in Chapter 1. By using your ability to think more quickly than the speaker can talk, you may be able to extract the thesis from the surrounding mass of words you're hearing. If you can't figure out what the speaker is driving at, you can always ask in a tactful way by using the skills of questioning and paraphrasing, which we'll examine now.

Ask Questions

Questioning involves asking for additional information to clarify your idea of the sender's message. If you ask directions to a friend's house, typical questions might be “Is your place an apartment?” or “How long does it take to get there from here?” In more serious situations, questions could include “What's bothering you?” or “Why are you so angry?” or “Why is that so important?” Notice that one key element of these questions is that they request the speaker to elaborate on information already given.

Despite their apparent benefits, not all questions are equally helpful. Whereas sincere questions are aimed at understanding others, counterfeit questions are really disguised attempts to send a message, not receive one.

Counterfeit questions come in several varieties:

- **Questions that make statements.** “Are you serious?” “You did what?” Comments like these are certainly not genuine requests for information. Emphasizing certain words can also turn a question into a statement: “You lent money to Tony?” We also use questions to offer advice. The person who responds with, “Are you going to stand up to him and give him what he deserves?” clearly has stated an opinion about what should be done.
- **Questions that carry hidden agendas.** “Are you busy Friday night?” is a dangerous question to answer. If you say, “No,” thinking the person has something fun in mind, you won't like hearing, “Good, because I need some help moving my piano.”
- **Questions that seek “correct” answers.** Most of us have been victims of question-askers who want to hear only a particular response. “Which shoes do you think I should wear?” can be a sincere question—unless the asker has a predetermined preference. When this happens, the asker isn't interested in listening to contrary opinions, and “incorrect” responses get shot down. Some of these questions may venture into delicate territory. “Honey, do you think I look ugly?” can be a request for a “correct” answer.

CULTURAL IDIOM

long-winded: speaking for a long time

to stand up to: to confront courageously

shot down: rejected or defeated

- **Questions that are based on unchecked assumptions.** “Why aren’t you listening to me?” assumes the other person isn’t paying attention. “What’s the matter?” assumes that something is wrong. As Chapter 2 explains, perception checking is a much better way of checking out assumptions: “When you kept looking over at the TV, I thought you weren’t listening to me, but maybe I was wrong. Were you paying attention?”

Unlike counterfeit questions, sincere questions are genuine requests for new information that clarifies a speaker’s thoughts or feelings. Although the value of sincere questioning might seem obvious, people don’t use this information-seeking approach enough. Communicators are often reluctant to show their ignorance by asking for explanation of what seems like it should be an obvious point. At times like this it’s a good idea to recall a quote attributed to Confucius: “He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask is a fool for life.”

Paraphrase

Questioning is often a valuable tool for increasing understanding. Sometimes, however, questions won’t help you understand a speaker’s ideas any more clearly. As the humorous drawing on this page shows, questions can even lead to greater misunderstandings. Now consider another type of feedback—one that would tell you whether you understood what had already been said before you asked additional questions. This sort of feedback, termed **paraphrasing**, involves restating in your own words the message you thought the speaker had just sent, without adding anything new.

(To a direction-giver) “You’re telling me to drive down to the traffic light by the high school and turn toward the mountains, is that it?”

(To the boss) “So you need me both this Saturday *and* next Saturday—right?”

(To a professor) “When you said, ‘Don’t worry about the low grade on the quiz,’ did you mean it won’t count against my grade?”

In other cases, a paraphrase will reflect your understanding of the speaker’s *feelings*:

“You said you understand, but you look confused. Are you?”

“You seem to be in a hurry. I get the idea you don’t want to talk now. Is that right?”

“You said ‘Forget it,’ but it sounds like you’re mad. Are you?”

Whether your paraphrasing reflects a speaker’s thoughts or feelings, and whether it focuses on a specific comment or a general theme, **the key to success is to restate the other person’s comments in your own words as a way of cross-checking the information.** If you simply repeat the speaker’s comments verbatim, you will

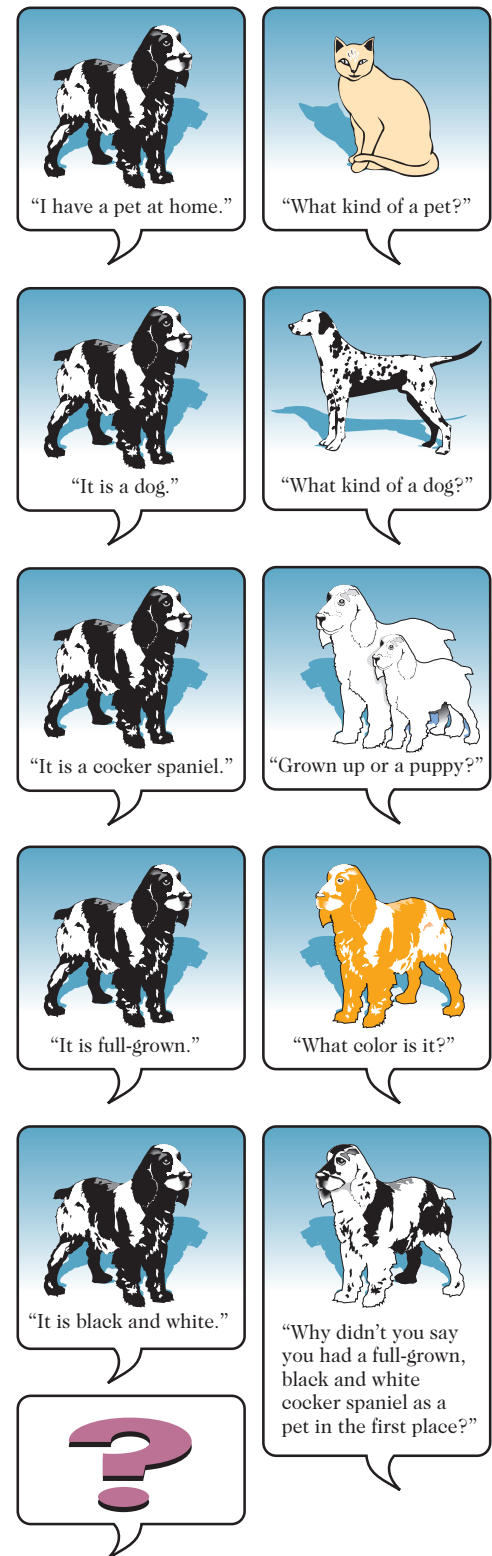


Figure 4-2 Asking Questions Doesn't Guarantee Understanding