

# Effective Listening

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## Learning Objectives:

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the difference between listening and hearing
- Understand the value of listening
- Identify the three attributes of active listeners
- Recognize barriers to effective listening
- Employ strategies to engage listeners
- Provide constructive feedback as a listener

## Chapter Outline:

- Introduction
- Hearing Versus Listening
- The Value of Listening
- Three A's of Active Listening
- Barriers to Effective Listening
- Strategies to Enhance Listening
- Providing Feedback to Speakers
- Encouraging Effective Listening
- Conclusion
- Review Questions & Activities

## Introduction

“You’re not listening!” An unhappy teen shouts this at a concerned parent. A frustrated parent yells this as a toddler runs through a parking lot. A teacher says it while flicking the overhead lights on and off, trying to get her unruly students to heed her. A woman offers these three words as a parting shot before hanging up on her significant other. A man complains of this to his spouse during a couple’s counseling session. We can imagine all these scenarios and more; all of them rooted in a speaker wondering if his or her audience is truly listening.



Public speaking requires an audience to hear. Otherwise it’s private speaking, and anyone overhearing you might wonder if you’ve lost your wits. What makes public speaking truly effective is when the audience hears and listens. You might think the two are synonymous. But they aren’t, as you will soon understand. In a classic listening text, Adler notes, “How utterly amazing is the general assumption that the ability to listen well is a natural gift for which no training is required.”<sup>11</sup> Since listening requires great effort, this chapter offers the skills needed to listen effectively.

Developing your listening skills can have applications throughout your educational, personal, and professional lives. You will begin by examining the difference between hearing and listening. This module will also help you understand your role as a listener, not only in a public speaking class, but also in the world. You’ll read about attributes of an active listener, barriers to

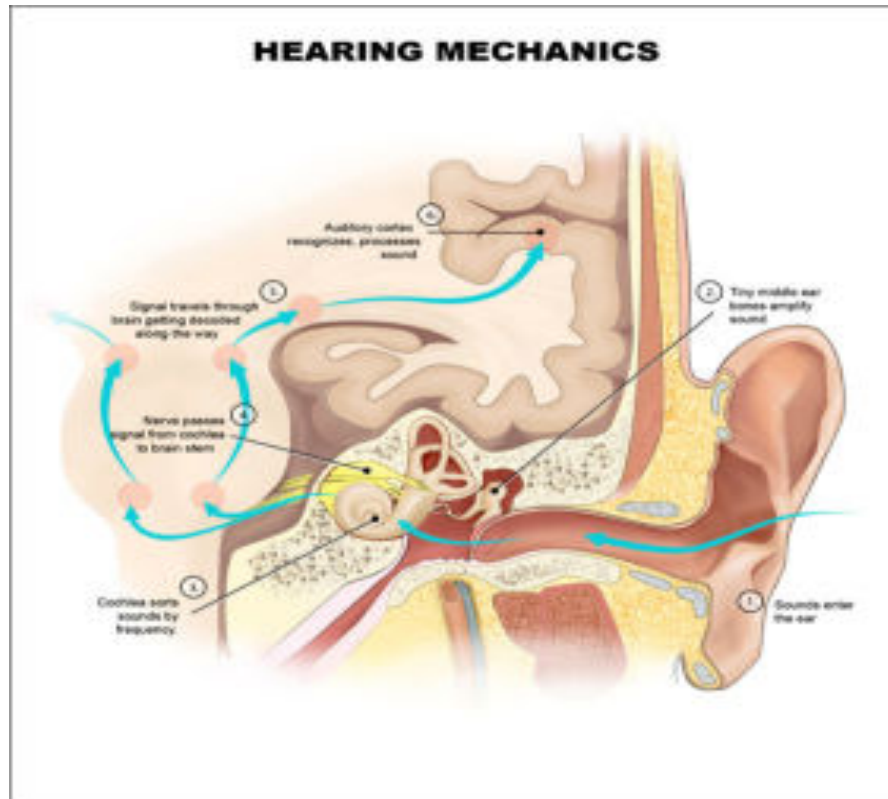
listening, and strategies to listen better. Finally, building on valuable lessons regarding listening, this chapter concludes with suggestions public speakers can use to encourage audiences to listen more attentively.

*“We have two ears and one tongue so that we would listen more and talk less.” – Diogenes*

## Hearing Versus Listening

A mother takes her four-year-old to the pediatrician reporting she’s worried about the girl’s hearing. The doctor runs through a battery of tests, checks in the girl’s ears to be sure everything looks good, and makes notes in the child’s folder. Then, she takes the mother by the arm. They move together to the far end of the room, behind the girl. The doctor whispers in a low voice to the concerned parent: “Everything looks fine. But, she’s been through a lot of tests today. You might want to take her for ice cream after this as a reward.” The daughter jerks her head around, a huge grin on her face, “Oh, please, Mommy! I love ice cream!” The doctor, speaking now at a regular volume, reports, “As I said, I don’t think there’s any problem with her hearing, but she may not always be choosing to listen.”

**Hearing** is something most everyone does without even trying. It is a physiological response to sound waves moving through the air at up to 760 miles per hour. First, we receive the sound in our ears. The wave of sound causes our eardrums to vibrate, which engages our brain to begin processing. The sound is then transformed into nerve impulses so that we can perceive the sound in our brains. Our auditory cortex recognizes a sound has been heard and begins to process the sound by matching it to previously encountered sounds in a process known as **auditory association**.<sup>14</sup> Hearing has kept our species alive for centuries. When you are asleep but wake in a panic having heard a noise downstairs, an age-old self-preservation response is kicking in. You were asleep. You weren’t listening for the noise—unless perhaps you are a parent of a teenager out past curfew—but you hear it. Hearing is unintentional, whereas **listening** (by contrast) requires you to pay conscious attention. Our bodies hear, but we need to employ intentional effort to actually listen.



We regularly engage in several different types of listening. When we are tuning our attention to a song we like, or a poetry reading, or actors in a play, or sitcom antics on television, we are listening for pleasure, also known as **appreciative listening**. When we are listening to a friend or family member, building our relationship with another through offering support and showing empathy for her feelings in the situation she is discussing, we are engaged in **relational listening**. Therapists, counselors, and conflict mediators are trained in another level known as **empathetic or therapeutic listening**. When we are at a political event, attending a debate, or enduring a salesperson touting the benefits of various brands of a product, we engage in critical listening. This requires us to be attentive to key points that influence or confirm our judgments. When we are focused on gaining information whether from a teacher in a classroom setting, or a pastor at church, we are engaging in **informational listening**.<sup>[2]</sup>

Yet, despite all these variations, Nichols called listening a “lost art.”<sup>[3]</sup> The ease of sitting passively without really listening is well known to anyone who has sat in a boring class with a professor droning on about the Napoleonic wars or proper pain medication regimens for patients allergic to painkillers. You hear the words the professor is saying, while you check Facebook on your phone under the desk. Yet, when the exam question features an analysis of Napoleon’s downfall or a screaming patient fatally allergic to codeine you realize you didn’t actually listen. Trying to recall what you heard is a challenge, because without your attention and intention to remember, the information is lost in the caverns of your cranium.

Listening is one of the first skills infants gain, using it to acquire language and learn to communicate with their parents. Bommelje suggests listening is the activity we do most in life, second only to breathing.<sup>[4]</sup> Nevertheless, the skill is seldom taught.

# The Value of Listening

Listening is a critical skill. The strategies endorsed in this chapter can help you to be a more attentive listener in any situation.

## Academic Benefits:

Bommelje, Houston, and Smither studied effective listening among 125 college students and found a strong link between effective listening and school success, supporting previous research in the field linking listening skills to grade point average.<sup>[1]</sup> This finding is unsurprising as the better you listen while in class, the better prepared you will be for your assignments and exams. It is quite simple really. When students listen, they catch the instructions, pointers, feedback, and hints they can use to make the assignment better or get a better score on the test.

*“Learning is a result of listening, which in turn leads to even better listening and attentiveness to the other person.” – Alice Miller*

## Professional Benefits:

Connecting listening skills to better leadership, Hoppe lists many professional advantages of active listening, indicating that it helps us: better understand and make connections between ideas and information; change perspectives and challenge assumptions; empathize and show respect or appreciation, which can enhance our relationships; and build self-esteem.<sup>[2]</sup> When people aren't listening, it becomes much more difficult to get things done effectively and trust is broken while fostering resentments. Bell and Mejer, identifying poor listening as a “silent killer of productivity and profit,” state change becomes extremely difficult to implement in a work environment when people are not listening.<sup>[3]</sup>

Effective listening can also help you to make a better impression on employers. This can begin at the interview. You really want the job, but you are really nervous. As a result, you are having trouble paying attention to what the CEO of the company is saying in your final interview. She asks you if you have any questions, and you ask something you were wondering about in the elevator on the way up to this penthouse office. You're unlikely to get the job if you ask something she's just talked about. Even if you, somehow, convince her to hire you, you will make little progress at the firm if your supervisors often have to tell you things again, or you make decisions that cost the company in lost profits because you weren't listening effectively in a team meeting.

Ferrari identifies listening as the “most critical business skill of all.” He notes, “listening can well be the difference between profit and loss, between success and failure, between a long career and a short one.”<sup>[4]</sup>

## Personal Benefits:

If listening is done well, the **communication loop** is effectively completed between speaker and receiver. The speaker shares a message with the receiver, having selected a particular method to communicate that message. The receiver aims to interpret the message and share understanding of the message with the speaker. Communication effectiveness is determined by the level of shared interpretation of the message reached through listener response and feedback. When done successfully, the loop is complete, and both sender and receiver feel connected. The active listener who employs the positive attributes detailed in this chapter is more likely to be better liked, in turn increasing her self-esteem. She is also likely to be better able to reduce tension in situations and resolve conflict.<sup>151</sup> After all, the symbols for ears, eyes, undivided attention, and heart comprise the Chinese character for “to listen.”<sup>152</sup> Truly listening to the words of a speaker is sure to make a positive difference in your interactions whether they are academic, professional, or personal.

## Three A’s of Active Listening



Effective listening is about self-awareness. You must pay attention to whether or not you are only hearing, *passively* listening, or *actively* engaging. Effective listening requires concentration and a focused effort that is known as active listening. Active listening can be broken down into three main elements.

*“Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly.” – Plutarch*

## Attention:

We know now that attention is the fundamental difference between hearing and listening. Paying attention to what a speaker is saying requires intentional effort on your part. Nichols, credited with first researching the field of listening, observed, “listening is hard work. It is characterized

by faster heart action, quicker circulation of the blood, a small rise in bodily temperature.”<sup>[1]</sup> Consider that we can process information four times faster than a person speaks. Yet, tests of listening comprehension show the average person listening at only 25% efficiency. A typical person can speak 125 words-per-minute, yet we can process up to three times faster, reaching as much as 500 words-per-minute. The poor listener grows impatient, while the effective listener uses the extra processing time to process the speaker’s words, distinguish key points, and mentally summarize them.<sup>[2]</sup>

Hoppe<sup>[3]</sup> advises active listening is really a state of mind requiring us to choose to focus on the moment, being present and attentive while disregarding any of our anxieties of the day. He suggests listeners prepare themselves for active attention by creating a **listening reminder**. This might be to write “Listen” at the top of a page in front of you in a meeting.

While reading a book, or having a discussion with an individual, you can go back and reread or ask a question to clarify a point. This is not always true when listening. Listening is of the moment, and we often only get to hear the speaker’s words once. The key then is for the listener to quickly ascertain the speaker’s central premise or controlling idea. Once this is done, it becomes easier for the listener to discern what is most important. Of course, distinguishing the speaker’s primary goal, his main points, and the structure of the speech are all easier when the listener is able to listen with an open mind.

### **Attitude:**

Even if you are paying attention, you could be doing so with the wrong attitude, the second A. Telling yourself this is all a waste of time is not going to help you to listen effectively. You’ll be better off determining an internal motivation to be attentive to the person speaking. Approaching the task of listening with a positive attitude and an open-mind will make the act of listening much easier. Bad listeners make snap judgments that justify the decision to be inattentive. Yet, since you’re already there, why not listen to see what you can learn? Kaponya warns against psychological **deaf spots** which impair our ability to perceive and understand things counter to our convictions. It can be as little as a word or phrase that might cause “an emotional eruption” causing communication efficiency to drop rapidly.<sup>[4]</sup> For instance, someone who resolutely supports military action as the best response to a terrorist action may be unable to listen objectively to a speaker endorsing negotiation as a better tool. Even if the speaker is effectively employing logic, drawing on credible sources, and appealing to emotion with a heartrending tale of the civilian casualties caused by bombings, this listener would be unable to keep an open mind. Failing to acknowledge your deaf spots will leave you at a deficit when listening.

You will always need to make up your own mind about where you stand—whether you agree or disagree with the speaker—but it is critical to do so *after* listening. Adler proposes having four questions in mind while listening: “What is the whole speech about?” “What are the main or pivotal ideas, conclusions, and arguments?” “Are the speaker’s conclusions sound or mistaken?” and “What of it?” Once you have an overall idea of the speech, determine the key points, and gauge your agreement, you can decide why it matters, how it affects you, or what you might do as a result of what you have heard. Yet, he notes it is “impossible” to answer all these questions at the same time as you are listening.<sup>[5]</sup> Instead, you have to be ready and willing to pay attention

to the speaker's point of view and changes in direction, patiently waiting to see where she is leading you.

*"There are things I can't force. I must adjust. There are times when the greatest change needed is a change of my viewpoint."* – Denis Diderot

## Adjustment:

To do this well, you need the final of the three A's: adjustment. Often when we hear someone speak, we don't know in advance what he is going to be saying. So, we need to be flexible, willing to follow a speaker along what seems like a verbal detour down a rabbit hole, until we are rewarded by the speaker reaching his final destination while his audience marvels at the creative means by which he reached his important point. If the audience members are more intent on reacting to or anticipating what is said, they will be poor listeners indeed.

Take time now to think about your own listening habits by completing the listening profile, adapted from Brownell.<sup>161</sup> The next section will consider ways to address the challenges of listening effectively.

### Listening Profile

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*The questions below correspond to each of the six listening components in HURIER: Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding. Before answering the questions, first guess which of the six you will do best at. In which area will you likely score lowest? Now respond to the following prompts gauging your listening behavior on a five-point scale (1 = almost never, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = almost always).*

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am constantly aware that people and circumstances change over time.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I take into account the speaker's personal and cultural perspective when listening to him or her.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I pay attention to the important things going on around me.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I accurately hear what is said to me.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I understand the speaker's vocabulary and recognize that my understanding of a work is likely to be somewhat different from the speaker's.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I adapt my response according to the needs of the particular situation.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I weigh all evidence before making a decision.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I take time to analyze the validity of my partner's reasoning before arriving at my own conclusion.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I can recall what I have heard, even when in stressful situations.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I enter communication situations with a positive attitude.



## Listening Profile

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\_\_\_\_\_ 11. I ask relevant questions and restate my perceptions to make sure I have understood the speaker correctly.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 12. I provide clear and direct feedback to others.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 13. I do not let my emotions interfere with my listening or decision-making.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 14. I remember how the speaker's facial expressions, body posture, and other nonverbal behaviors relate to the verbal message.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 15. I overcome distractions such as the conversation of others, background noises, and telephones, when someone is speaking.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 16. I distinguish between main ideas and supporting evidence when I listen.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 17. I am sensitive to the speaker's tone in communication situations.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 18. I listen to and accurately remember what is said, even when I strongly disagree with the speaker's viewpoint.

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Add your scores for 4 + 10 + 15. This is your hearing total.

Add your scores for 5 + 11 + 16. This is your understanding total.

Add your scores for 1 + 7 + 8. This is your evaluating total.

Add your scores for 3 + 9 + 18. This is your remembering total.

Add your scores for 2 + 14 + 17. This is your interpreting total.

Add your scores for 6 + 12 + 13. This is your responding total.

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*In which skill area do you score highest? Which is your lowest? How would these listening behaviors affect your interactions with peers, parents, instructors, or professional coworkers?*

# Barriers to Effective Listening

We get in our own way when it comes to effective listening. While listening may be the communication skill we use foremost in formal education environments, it is taught the least (behind, in order, writing, reading, and speaking).<sup>13</sup> To better learn to listen it is first important to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses as listeners. We routinely ignore the barriers to our effective listening; yet anticipating, judging, or reacting emotionally can all hinder our ability to listen attentively.

## Anticipating”

Anticipating, or thinking about what the listener is likely to say, can detract from listening in several ways. On one hand, the listener might find the speaker is taking too long to make a point and try to anticipate what the final conclusion is going to be. While doing this, the listener has stopped actively listening to the speaker. A listener who knows too much, or thinks they do, listens poorly. The only answer is humility, and recognizing there is always something new to be learned.

Anticipating what we will say in response to the speaker is another detractor to effective listening. Imagine your roommate comes to discuss your demand for quiet from noon to 4 p.m. every day so that you can nap in complete silence and utter darkness. She begins by saying, “I wonder if we could try to find a way that you could nap with the lights on, so that I could use our room in the afternoon, too.” She might go on to offer some perfectly good ideas as to how this might be accomplished, but you’re no longer listening because you are too busy anticipating what you will say in response to her complaint. Once she’s done speaking, you are ready to enumerate all of the things she’s done wrong since you moved in together. Enter the Resident Assistant to mediate a conflict that gets out of hand quickly. This communication would have gone differently if you had actually listened instead of jumping ahead to plan a response.

*“An expert is someone who has succeeded in making decisions and judgments simpler through knowing what to pay attention to and what to ignore.” – Edward de Bono*

## Judging:

Jumping to conclusions about the speaker is another barrier to effective listening. Perhaps you’ve been in the audience when a speaker makes a small mistake; maybe it’s mispronouncing a word or misstating the hometown of your favorite athlete. An effective listener will overlook this minor gaffe and continue to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt. A listener looking for an excuse not to give their full attention to the speaker will instead take this momentary lapse as proof of flaws in all the person has said and will go on to say.

This same listener might also judge the speaker based on superficialities. Focusing on delivery or personal appearance—a squeaky voice, a ketchup stain on a white shirt, mismatched socks, a bad haircut, or a proclaimed love for a band that no one of any worth could ever profess to like—might help the ineffective listener justify a choice to stop listening. Still, this is always a choice.

The effective listener will instead accept that people may have their own individual foibles, but they can still be good speakers and valuable sources of insight or information.

### **Reacting Emotionally:**

When the speaker says an **emotional trigger**, it can be even more difficult to listen effectively. A guest speaker on campus begins with a personal story about the loss of a parent, and instead of listening you become caught up grieving a family member of your own. Or, a presenter takes a stance on drug use, abortion, euthanasia, religion, or even the best topping for a pizza that you simply can't agree with. You begin formulating a heated response to the speaker's perspective, or searing questions you might ask to show the holes in the speaker's argument. Yet, you've allowed your emotional response to the speaker interfere with your ability to listen effectively. Once emotion is involved, effective listening stops.

*"A person who talks when you wish him to listen." – Ambrose Bierce*

## **Strategies to Enhance Listening**

### **Keep an Open Mind:**

Thinking about listening might make you feel tense in the moment. The effective listener is instead calm with a focused and alert mind. You are not waiting to hear what you want to hear, but listening to "what is said as it is said."<sup>14</sup> Effective listeners keep an open mind. Remember that listening to a point of view is not the same as accepting that point of view. Recognizing this can help you to cultivate a more open perspective, helping you to better adjust as you listen actively to a speaker. Also, it might help you to curtail your emotions. If you do encounter a point that incenses you, write it down to return to later. For now, you should keep on listening.

### **Identify Distractions:**

In any setting where you are expected to listen, you encounter numerous distractions. For instance, the father sitting in the living room watching television, might want to turn off the television to better enable him to listen to his son when he comes into the room saying, "Dad, I have a problem." In the classroom setting, you might be distracted sitting beside friends who make sarcastic comments throughout the class. In a new product meeting with the sales team, you could be unnerved by the constant beep of your phone identifying another text, email, or phone message has arrived. Identifying the things that will interrupt your attention, and making a conscious choice to move to a different seat or turn off your phone, can help position you to listen more effectively.

### **Come Prepared:**

Another useful strategy is to come prepared when you can. Any time you enter a listening situation with some advance working knowledge of the speaker and what might be expected of you as a listener, you will be better able to adjust and engage more deeply in what is being said.

For instance, you might read the assigned readings for class, do the lab work before the lecture writing up the results, read a biography of a guest speaker before you go to an event, review the agenda from the previous staff meeting, or consult with a colleague about a client before going on-site to make a sale.

### **Take Notes:**

Taking notes can also advance your ability to be actively engaged in the speaker's words. You need not write down everything the speaker is saying. First, this is quite likely to be impossible. Second, once you are caught up in recording a speaker's every word, you are no longer listening. Use a tape recorder instead—having asked the speaker's permission first—if you feel you really must capture every word the speaker utters. You want to focus your efforts on really listening with an active mind. Learning to focus your attention on main points, key concepts, and gaining the overall gist of the speaker's talk is another skill to develop. You might endeavor to do this by jotting down a few notes or even drawing visuals that help you to recall the main ideas. The manner in which you take the notes is up to you; what is important is the fact that you are listening and working to process what is being said. Writing down questions that come to mind and asking questions of the speaker when it is possible, are two more ways to guarantee effective listening as you have found an internal motivation to listen attentively.

*“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” – Robert Frost*

## **Providing Feedback to Speakers**

There are many ways in which a listener can offer feedback to a speaker, sometimes even wordlessly. Keeping an open mind is something you do internally, but you can also demonstrate openness to a speaker through your **nonverbal communication**.

### **Nonverbal Feedback:**

Boothman recommends listening with your whole body, not just your ears.<sup>14</sup> Consider how confident you would feel speaking to a room full of people with their eyes closed, arms and legs crossed, and bodies bent in slouches. These listeners are presenting nonverbal cues that they are uninterested and unimpressed. Meanwhile, a listener sitting up straight, facing you with an intent look on his face is more likely to offer reassurance that your words are being understood.

Eye contact is another nonverbal cue to the speaker that you are paying attention. You don't want to be bug-eyed and unblinking; the speaker might assume there is a tiger behind her and begin to panic as you seem to be doing. However, attentive eye contact can indicate you are listening, and help you to stay focused too. There are some cultures where maintaining eye contact would cause discomfort, so keep that in mind. Also, you may be someone who listens better with eyes closed to visualize what is being said. This can be difficult for a speaker to recognize, so if this is you consider incorporating one of the following nonverbals while you listen with eyes closed.

Nodding your head affirmatively, making back-channel responses such as “Yes,” “Umhum,” or “OK” can help the speaker gauge your interest. Even the speed of your head nod can signal your level of patience or understanding.<sup>[2]</sup> Leaning in as a listener is far more encouraging than slumping in your seat. Miller suggests the “**listener’s lean**” demonstrates “ultimate interest. This joyous feedback is reflexive. It physically endorses our communiqué.”<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, sending too many nonverbal responses to the speaker can go wrong too. After all, a conference room full of people shifting in their seats and nodding their heads may translate as a restless audience that the speaker needs to recapture.

*“The only way to entertain some folks is to listen to them.” – Kin Hubbard*

### **Verbal Feedback:**

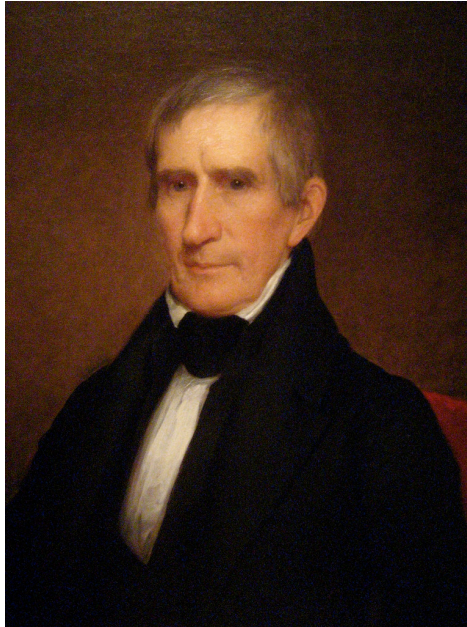
While speakers sometimes want all questions held until the end of a presentation, asking questions when the opportunity presents itself can help you as a listener. For one, you have to listen in order to be able to ask a question. Your goal should be to ask open-ended questions (“What do you think about....?” rather than “We should do ....., right?”). You can use questions to confirm your understanding of the speaker’s message. If you’re not entirely sure of a significant point, you might ask a clarifying question. These are questions such as “What did you mean?” “Can you be more specific?” or “What is a concrete example of your point?” These can help your comprehension, while also offering the speaker feedback. When asking questions, approach the speaker in a positive, non-threatening way. A good listener doesn’t seek to put the speaker on the defensive. You want to demonstrate your objectivity and willingness to listen to the speaker’s response.



Finally, paraphrasing what has been said in your interactions with the speaker can be another useful tool for a good listener. Imagine the difference if, before you respond to an upset colleague, you take a moment to say, “I understand you are disappointed we didn’t consult you before moving forward with the product release...” before you say, “we didn’t have time to get everyone’s input.” Reflecting back the speaker’s point of view before you respond allows the speaker to know you were listening and helps foster trust that everyone’s voice is being heard.

## **Encouraging Effective Listening**

William Henry Harrison was the ninth President of the United States. He’s also recognized for giving the worst State of the Union address—ever. His two-hour speech delivered in a snowstorm in 1841 proves that a long speech can kill (and not in the colloquial “it was so good” sense). Perhaps it was karma, but after the President gave his meandering speech discussing ancient Roman history more than campaign issues, he died from a cold caught while blathering on standing outside without a hat or coat.<sup>11</sup>



Now, when asked what you know about Abraham Lincoln, you're likely to have more answers to offer. Let's focus on his Gettysburg Address. The speech is a model of brevity. His "of the people, by the people, for the people" is always employed as an example of parallelism, and he kept his words simple. In short, Lincoln considered his listening audience when writing his speech.

*"The habit of common and continuous speech is a symptom of mental deficiency. It proceeds from not knowing what is going on in other people's minds."* – Walter Bagehot

When you sit down to compose a speech, keep in mind that you are **writing for the ear** rather than the eye. Listeners cannot go back and reread what you have just said. They need to grasp your message in the amount of time it takes you to speak the words. To help them accomplish this, you need to give listeners a clear idea of your overarching aim, reasons to care, and cues about what is important. You need to inspire them to want to not just hear but engage in what you are saying.

### **Make Your Listeners Care:**

Humans are motivated by ego; they always want to know "what's in it for me?" So, when you want to get an audience's attention, it is imperative to establish a reason for your listeners to care about what you are saying.

Some might say Oprah did this by giving away cars at the end of an episode. But, that only explains why people waited in line for hours to get a chance to sit in the audience as her shows were taped. As long as they were in the stands, they didn't need to listen to get the car at the end of the show. Yet Oprah had audiences listening to her for 25 years before she launched her own network. She made listeners care about what she was saying. She told them what was in that episode for them. She made her audience members feel like she was talking to them about their

problems, and offering solutions that they could use—even if they weren't multibillionaires known worldwide by first name alone.

Audiences are also more responsive when you find a means to tap their **intrinsic motivation**, by appealing to curiosity, challenging them, or providing contextualization.<sup>[2]</sup> You might appeal to the audience's curiosity if you are giving an informative speech about a topic they might not be familiar with already. Even in a narrative speech, you can touch on curiosity by cueing the audience to the significant thing they will learn about you or your topic from the story. A speech can present a challenge too. Persuasive speeches challenge the audience to think in a new way. Special Occasion speeches might challenge the listeners to reflect or prompt action. Providing a listener with contextualization comes back to the what's in it for me motivation. A student giving an informative speech about the steps in creating a mosaic could simply offer a step-by-step outline of the process, or she can frame it by saying to her listener, "by the end of my speech, you'll have all the tools you need to make a mosaic on your own." This promise prompts the audience to sit further forward in their seats for what might otherwise be a dry how-to recitation.

### **Cue Your Listeners:**

Audiences also lean in further when you employ active voice. We do this in speaking without hesitation. Imagine you were walking across campus and saw the contents of someone's room dumped out on the lawn in front of your dorm. You'd probably tell a friend: "The contents of Jane's room were thrown out the window by Julie." Wait, that doesn't sound right. You're more likely to say: "Julie threw Jane's stuff out the window!" The latter is an example of active voice. You put the actor (Julie) and the action (throwing Jane's stuff) at the beginning. When we try to speak formally, we can fall into passive voice. Yet, it sounds stuffy, and so unfamiliar to your listener's ear that he will struggle to process the point while you've already moved on to the next thing you wanted to say.

*"Twice and thrice over, as they say, good is it to repeat and review what is good." – Plato*

Knowing that your audience only hears what you are saying the one time you say it, invites you to employ repetition. Listeners are more likely to absorb a sound when it is repeated. We are often unconsciously waiting for a repetition to occur so we can confirm what we thought we heard.<sup>[3]</sup> As a result, employing repetition can emphasize an idea for the listener. Employing repetition of a word, words, or sentence can create a rhythm for the listener's ear. Employing repetition too often, though, can be tiresome.

If you don't want to repeat things so often you remind your listener of a sound clip on endless loop, you can also cue your listener through vocal emphasis. Volume is a tool that speakers can employ to gain attention. Certainly parents use it all of the time. Yet, you probably don't want to spend your entire speech shouting at your audience. Instead, you can modulate your voice so that you say something important slightly louder. Or, you say something more softly, although still audible, before echoing it again with greater volume to emphasize the repetition. Changing your pitch or volume can help secure audience attention for a longer period of time, as we welcome the variety.



Pace is another speaker's friend. This is not to be confused with the moving back and forth throughout a speech that someone might do nervously (inadvertently inducing motion sickness in his audience). Instead it refers to planning to pause after an important point or question to allow your audience the opportunity to think about what you have just said. Or, you might speak more quickly (although still clearly) to emphasize your fear or build humor in a long list of concerns while sharing an anecdote. Alternately, you could slow down for more solemn topics or to emphasize the words in a critical statement. For instance, a persuasive speaker lobbying for an audience to stop cutting down trees in her neighborhood might say, "this can't continue. It's up to you to do something." But imagine her saying these words with attention paid to pacing and each period representing a pause. She could instead say, "This. Can't. Continue. It's up to you. Do something."

### **Convince Them to Engage:**

Listeners respond to people. Consider this introduction to a speech about a passion for college football:

*It's college football season! Across the nation, the season begins in late summer. Teams play in several different divisions including the SEC, the ACC, and Big Ten. Schools make a lot of money playing in the different divisions, because people love to watch football on TV. College football is great for the fans, the players, and the schools.*

Now, compare it to this introduction to another speech about the same passion:

*When I was a little boy, starting as early as four, my father would wake me up on Fall Saturdays with the same three words: "It's Game Day!" My dad was a big Clemson Tigers fan, so we might drive to Death Valley to see a game. Everyone would come: my mom, my grandparents, and friends who went to Clemson too. We would all tailgate before the game—playing corn hole, tossing a foam football, and watching the satellite TV. Even though we loved Clemson football best, all college football was worth watching. You never knew when there would be an upset. You could count on seeing pre-professional athletes performing amazing feats. But, best of all, it was a way to bond with my family, and later my friends.*

Both introductions set up the topic and even give an idea of how the speech will be organized. Yet, the second one is made more interesting by the human element. The speech is personalized.

The college football enthusiast speaker might continue to make the speech interesting to his listeners by appealing to commonalities. He might acknowledge that not everyone in his class is a Clemson fan, but all of them can agree that their school's football team is fun to watch. Connecting with the audience through referencing things the speaker has in common with the listeners can function as an appeal to **ethos**. The speaker is credible to the audience because he is like them. Or, it can work as an appeal to **pathos**. A speaker might employ this emotional appeal in a persuasive speech about Habitat for Humanity by asking her audience to think first about the comforts of home or dorm living that they all take for granted.

*“If you engage people on a vital, important level, they will respond.” – Edward Bond*

In speaking to the audience about the comforts of dorm living, the speaker is unlikely to refer to the “dormitories where we each reside.” More likely, she might say, “the dorms we live in.” As with electing to use active voice, speakers can choose to be more conversational than they might be in writing an essay on the same topic.

The speaker might use contractions, or colloquialisms, or make comparisons to popular television shows, music, or movies. This will help the listeners feel like the speaker is in conversation with them—admittedly a one-sided one—rather than talking at them. It can be off-putting to feel the speaker is simply reciting facts and figures and rushing to get through to the end of their speech, whereas listeners respond to someone talking to them calmly and confidently. Being conversational can help to convey this attitude even when on the inside the speaker is far from calm or confident. Nevertheless, employ this strategy with caution. Being too colloquial, for instance using “Dude” throughout the speech, could undermine your credibility. Or a popular culture example that you think is going to be widely recognized might not be the common knowledge you think it is, and could confuse audiences with non-native listeners.

*“Choice of attention—to pay attention to this and ignore that—is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.” – W. H. Auden*

## Conclusion

Admittedly, this discussion of listening may add a layer of intimidation for public speakers. After all, it can be daunting to think of having to get an audience to not only hear, but also truly listen.

Nevertheless, once we recognize the difference and become aware of active listening and its barriers, we can better tailor our spoken words to captivate and engage an audience. A broader awareness of the importance of effective listening is another weapon in your arsenal as a public speaker. At the same time, building up your own effective listening skills can enhance your academic, professional, and personal success. Being heard is one thing, but speakers need listeners to complete the communication loop. Reap the rewards: Instead of saying “I hear you,” try out “I’m listening.”

## Review Questions & Activities

### Review Questions:

1. What distinguishes listening from hearing?
2. What are some benefits for you personally from effective listening?
3. Name and give an example of each of the three A’s of active listening.
4. Identify the three main barriers to listening. Which of these barriers is most problematic for you? What can you do about it?

5. What does an effective listener do with the extra thought process time while a speaker is speaking only 150 words-per-minute?
6. How can you communicate non-verbally that you are listening?
7. What are some considerations in offering constructive feedback?
8. What are strategies that help hold your listeners' attention during your speech?

**Activities:**

1. Discuss the following in small groups. How do your listening behaviors change in the following situations: A) At a concert, B) In class, C) At the dinner table with your parents, D) In a doctor's office? What are the distractions and other barriers to listening you might encounter in each setting? What might you do to overcome the barriers to effective listening in each situation?
2. Listen to someone you disagree with (maybe a politician from the opposing party) and work to listen actively with an open mind. Try to pay attention to the person's argument and the reasons he offers in support of his point of view. Your goal is to identify why the speaker believes what he does and how he proves it. You need not be converted by this person's argument.
3. Reflect on a situation in your personal life where poor listening skills created a problem. Briefly describe the situation, then spend the bulk of your reflection analyzing what went wrong in terms of listening and how, specifically, effective listening would have made a difference. Share your observations in small group class discussion.
4. Spend a few minutes brainstorming your trigger words. What are the words that would provoke a strong emotional response in you? List three concrete strategies you might use to combat this while being an effective listener.