

Lesson 2

Becoming a Better Listener



Key Words

hearing
listening
thought speed
trigger words

What You Will Learn to Do

- Use active listening strategies

Linked Core Abilities

- Communicate using verbal, nonverbal, visual, and written techniques
- Treat self and others with respect

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Explain how barriers prevent effective listening
- Compile a list of trigger words
- Identify four tips to improve effective listening skills
- Define the key words contained in this lesson

Introduction

Listening is the neglected communication skill. We spend nearly half of our communication time listening, but few of us make any real effort to be better listeners. This lesson takes a look at way that you can become a better listener. By learning to listen, you can respond more appropriately and communicate better with those around you.

Learning to Listen

Although all of us have had instruction in reading, writing, and speaking, we rarely get any training in listening. This seems like a misplaced emphasis when you consider that out of all the time we spend communicating (70 percent of our awake time), 10 percent of that time is spent writing, 15 percent is spent reading, 30 percent is spent talking, and an overwhelming 45 percent is spent listening.

Good listening is important to everyone. In the business world, listening is the communication most critical for success; but listening also is important in other places—at home, in school, in houses of worship, in civic clubs, and at social gatherings. Listening is important, not only for gaining information but also for the building of relationships.

Listening is the skill that can make or break a relationship. It is as important for you to understand the person as it is to understand what the person is saying. There is a lot more to listening than just understanding the meaning of words.

The Process of Listening

Listening is a complex process. It is an essential part of the total communication process. Unfortunately it is a part that is often ignored. There are two reasons why this happens.

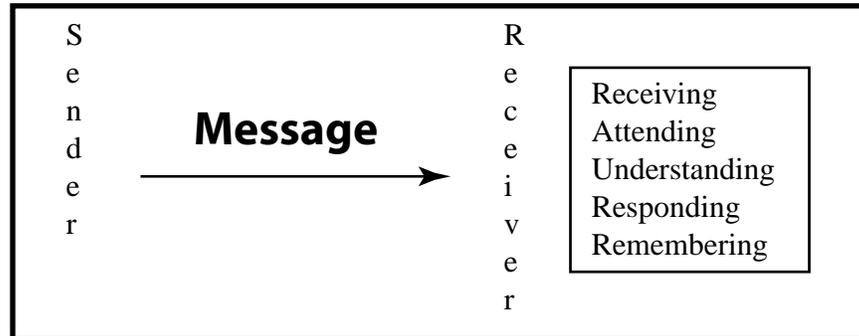
Speaking and writing, which are the sending parts of the communication process, are highly visible and are much easier to evaluate. You are much more frequently tested on what you read than on what you hear.

Also, we are not as willing to improve our listening skills. Much of this unwillingness results from our incomplete understanding of the listening process. To understand the process, we must first define it.

You can define the listening process as the process of receiving, attending, and understanding messages transmitted through the medium of sound. Often the steps of responding and remembering may follow. Figure 4.2.1 shows the flow of the message from the sender to the receiver, and what the receiver does when the message is heard.

Figure 4.2.1: Process of listening.

Courtesy of CACI and the U.S. Army.



Key Note Terms

listening – making an effort to hear something; paying attention

hearing – to perceive by the ear; to listen attentively

Receiving

Speaking is the call to **listening**. The speaker has not communicated until the receiver interprets and understands the message sent. Remember that **hearing** and listening are not the same. *Hearing* is the reception of sound. *Listening* is the attachment of meaning to sound. Hearing is, however, a necessary step for listening, and an important component of the listening process.

Attending

Hearing is only the first part of listening. You must then interpret, appreciate, or evaluate what you are hearing. Good listening requires energy and concentration, even though you tend to think of it as an automatic process. After you have received a message, you must attend to it. Whether or not you attend to an incoming message is a choice you actually have to make. Until you pick up the math book and study for the test, you have not attended to the message that a “math test is tomorrow.”

Understanding

Effective communication depends on understanding. That is, effective communication does not take place until the receiver understands the message. Understanding must result for communication to be effective.

Responding

Sometimes a response is appropriate during communication. There are several types of responses.

- **Direct verbal responses.** These may be spoken or written.
- **Responses that seek clarification.** This involves asking for further information.
- **Responses that paraphrase.** You may say, “in other words, what you are saying is. . .” A paraphrase gives the sender a chance to confirm that you understand the message.
- **Nonverbal responses.** Sometimes a nod of the head or a “thumbs up” may communicate that the message is understood.

Responding is a form of feedback that completes the communication transaction. It lets the sender know that the message was received, attended to, and understood.

Remembering

Memory is often a necessary and essential part of the listening process. What is the relationship between memory and listening? Understanding the differences between short-term memory and long-term memory will help explain the relationship.

With short-term memory, information is used immediately, as with looking up phone numbers. This type of memory can only hold a limited amount of information, and is very sensitive to interruption.

Long-term memory allows you to recall information and events hours, days, weeks, and sometimes years later. For example, think of all the things you can remember that happened to you as you were growing up.

Types of Listening

Different situations require different types of listening. You may listen to obtain information, improve a relationship, gain appreciation for something, make discriminations, or engage in a critical evaluation.

Although certain skills are basic and necessary for all types of listening (receiving, attending, and understanding), each type requires some special skills. Before you can fully appreciate the skills and apply the guidelines, you must understand the different types of listening.

Informative Listening

With this type of listening, the primary concern is to understand the message. Much of your learning comes from informative listening. For example, you listen to lectures or instructions from teachers, and what you learn depends on how well you listen. If you listen poorly, you are not equipped with the information you need. There are three key factors for informative listening.

- **Vocabulary.** Increasing your vocabulary will increase your potential for better understanding.
- **Concentration.** Sometimes it is hard to concentrate because more than one thing is going on at a time. Perhaps the listeners are preoccupied with other thoughts, or with their own needs. It may also be true that they are just not interested. Others have not learned how to concentrate while listening. They have not made themselves responsible for good listening. Concentration requires discipline, motivation, and acceptance of responsibility.
- **Memory.** You cannot process information without bringing memory into play. Memory helps informative listening in three ways. It provides the knowledge bank for you to recall experiences and prior information. It also allows you to create expectations and make decisions concerning what you encounter by calling on your past experiences. Finally, it allows you to understand what others say. Without memory of words and concepts, you could not communicate with anyone else and understand the meaning of messages.

Relationship Listening

The purpose of relationship listening (see Figure 4.2.2) is to either help an individual or to improve the relationship between people. Although relationship listening requires you to listen for information, the emphasis is on understanding the other person. Three behaviors are key to effective relationship listening: attending, supporting, and empathizing.

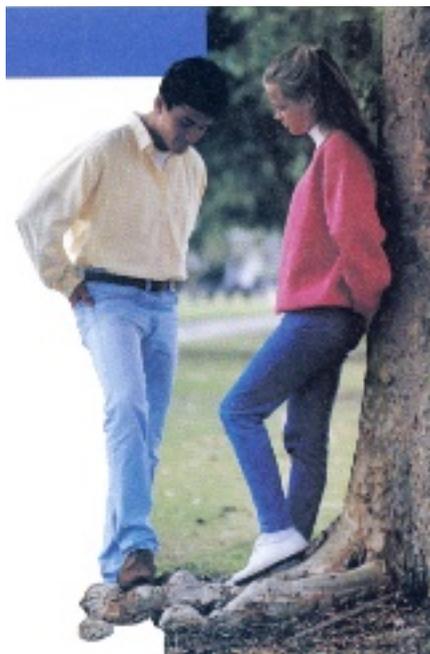
- **Attending.** In relationship listening, attending behaviors indicate that the listener is focusing on the speaker. Little things such as nodding your head or saying “I see,” will let the speaker know that you are involved.
- **Supporting.** Many responses have a negative or nonsupportive effect. For example, interrupting the speaker or changing the subject are not supportive. Sometimes the best response is silence. Three characteristics describe supportive listeners:
 - They are careful about what they say,
 - They express belief in the other person,
 - They demonstrate patience (they are willing to give the time).
- **Empathizing.** What is empathy? It is not sympathy, which is a feeling for or about another. Nor is it apathy, which is a lack of feeling. Empathy is feeling and thinking with another person. This characteristic enables you to see, hear, or feel as others do. It allows you to “walk in someone else’s shoes.” Empathetic listening is critical to effective relationship listening.

Appreciative Listening

Appreciative listening includes listening to music for enjoyment, to speakers because you like their style, to your choices in theater, television, radio, or film. It is the response of the listener, not the source of the message, which defines appreciative listening. The quality of appreciative listening depends in large part on three factors: presentation, perception, and previous experiences.

Figure 4.2.2: Relationship listening requires a great deal of attentiveness.

Courtesy of Paul Barton/The Stock Market/Corbis Images.



- **Presentation.** Presentation encompasses such factors as the medium (the form or way it is presented), the setting, or the style and personality of the presenter.
- **Perception.** Your attitudes determine how you react to and interact with the world around you. Perceptions are critical to how and whether or not you appreciate the things to which you listen.
- **Previous experiences.** Sometimes the experience you have had in the past influences how you appreciate or enjoy things. If you know too much about the topic, you may be too critical about it. If you associate pleasant experiences with the topic, you may have a more positive attitude toward the subject.

Critical Listening

Critical listening goes beyond appreciative listening because it adds the dimension of judgment. Critical listening is listening to comprehend and then evaluate the message. The ability to listen critically is especially essential in a democracy. For example, to make an informed decision in any governmental election, or to form intelligent opinions, you must be able to listen to all the information presented to you, evaluate what is relevant and what isn't, and come up with your own ideas. Not knowing, understanding, or critically listening to the information leads to misunderstanding of any issue.

Discriminative Listening

By being sensitive to changes in the speaker's rate, volume, force, pitch, and emphasis, the discriminative listener can detect both small and major differences in meaning. Small clues can strengthen relationship listening. Small differences in sound can enhance appreciative listening. Sensitivity to pauses and nonverbal cues allow critical listeners to more accurately judge not only the speaker's message, but the intentions of the message as well. There are three skills important for discriminative listening.

- **Hearing ability.** Obviously, for people who do not hear well, it is difficult to discriminate among sounds.
- **Awareness of sound structure.** Listeners that understand the structure of the language being used for the message will have an advantage in discriminative listening.
- **Ability to integrate nonverbal cues.** Words do not always communicate true feelings. The way they are said or the way the speaker acts may be the key to understanding the true or intended message.

Effective listening, whether informative, relational, appreciative, critical, or discriminative, requires skill.

Barriers to Effective Listening

To become a better listener, it is important to understand the barriers that can get in the way of effective listening. After you understand these barriers, you can work to overcome them. These barriers include the following:

- **Laziness.** Effective listening can be hard work.
- **Internal distractions.** Sometimes you have a lot on your mind, which makes it hard to concentrate on what someone else is saying to you.
- **Past relationships.** Both a poor and an excellent past relationship with the speaker can affect how you listen.
- **Lack of trust.** Believing that the speaker has betrayed your trust or that the speaker does not have your best interests in mind is a barrier that can hinder effective listening.
- **Lack of self-confidence.** If the speaker does not sound confident, you will have a harder time staying focused on what you hear.
- **Prejudice.** Prejudice can affect how you hear the speaker as well as how you receive the information.
- **The “halo” effect.** If the speaker has an association with someone or something you already like, you are much more likely to be receptive to the speaker as well as the information. You may not question what you should question.
- **The “horns” effect.** If the speaker has an association with someone or something about which you have negative feelings, you may not listen the way you should.
- **External distractions.** Sometimes there are a lot of things going on in the same location where you are trying to listen to the speaker.
- **A different level of power between you and the speaker.** Either you may have the authority, or the speaker may. Either way, it can impact how you listen.
- **Gender preferences.** You may have different expectations because of the gender of the speaker.
- **Emotionality on the part of the speaker.** If the speaker becomes passionate about the topic, it may distract you from hearing the real message.
- **Prejudging the message before the entire message has been delivered.** Sometimes a speaker will say something at the start of a speech or conversation that may distract you from effectively listening to the rest.
- **Allowing personal characteristics of the speaker to get in the way.** If the speaker is unkempt or dresses sloppily, for example, you might not pay attention to everything that is said.
- **Not caring about the speaker.** Being indifferent to the person can affect how well you pay attention to the message.
- **Interrupting.** Sometimes the listener is so excited about an idea he or she wants to share that the listener does not wait for the speaker's thoughts to be completed. This distracts both the listener and the speaker.
- **Trigger words.** Some words evoke an emotional response that prevents effective listening. These words are distracting because they make you concentrate on something else besides what is being said. If a speaker uses the word *lottery*, your mind might wander to untold riches. Words like *homework* or *test scores* may also distract you.
- **Delivery style.** Sometimes the way the speaker communicates can be distracting. The speaker might have a very monotone voice or may stutter. Some people continuously put in verbal pauses like “uh” or “you know.” Any of these things may cause you to concentrate more on the delivery than the content.

Key Note Term

trigger words – words that evoke an emotional response that prevents effective listening



Figure 4.2.3: What are these students doing that demonstrate that they are effective listeners?

Courtesy of Ken Karp.

How to Be an Effective Listener

There are many guidelines that will help you to become a more effective listener (see Figure 4.2.3). Most involve listening “actively” while others speak.

- **Find an area of interest.** Listen with a purpose. Be interested. Try to organize what you hear.
- **Judge content, not delivery.** Do not stop listening because the sender does not meet expectations. Listen to the words. Look for the message.
- **Hold your fire.** Do not get overstimulated by the message. Do not react until the message is complete. Keep your emotions in check. Do not interrupt because you believe that what you have to say is more important or more correct. There will be time for you to react later. The speaker may surprise you and wind up saying what you want to say.
- **Listen for ideas.** Focus on the person’s central ideas. Do not get bogged down in the details. Try to listen at a higher level. Listen for new knowledge or concepts.
- **Be flexible.** Vary the ways in which you attempt to remember the information. Concentrate on finding the best way to learn the information.
- **Work at listening.** Establish and maintain eye contact. Acknowledge understanding. Stay tuned-in.
- **Resist distractions.** Concentrate on the speaker. Tune out other things that may be going on. Turn off the things you can control, like the TV or the radio. Try not to do several things at the same time. Focus on the sender.
- **Exercise your mind.** Challenge yourself to listen totally. Try it for short time and then make it longer and longer. See if you can listen to an entire presentation without losing concentration.
- **Keep your mind open.** Communication efficiency drops to zero when we hear certain trigger words, such as communist, Democrat, or Republican. Everyone has words that evoke an emotional response. Effective listeners are aware of keeping their convictions and emotions in check.
- **Capitalize on thought speed.** Most of us talk at 120 words a minute. Our thinking speed is about 500 words a minute. That gives us a lot of spare time while a person is speaking to us. Poor listeners let their minds wander. Good listeners think about what is being said by anticipating the point, summarizing, weighing evidence, or looking for nonverbal clues.

Key Note Term

thought speed – the amount of time it takes for people to hear a thought and process it; typically considerably faster than speaking time

Conclusion

So now you know the parts of the listening process. You know there are various types of listening. You have read about barriers to effective listening and tips for overcoming those barriers. Use this information to improve your skills and become a better listener. Remember, improved listening involves work, but the results are well worth the effort.

Now that you've learned how to be a better listener, the following lesson helps you learn to communicate in groups. You will examine some of the characteristics and social influences that can affect group communications.

Lesson Review

1. Explain why listening is so important in learning.
2. Choose one type of response and discuss it.
3. How can critical listening help you with a friend or family member?
4. Define the term *thought speed*.