

How to Be an Effective Listener

The first four chapters discussed the need for effective listening, fallacies about listening, the process of listening, and the types of listening. They provided the background you need to improve your listening skills. This chapter is a prescriptive one. It offers practical suggestions on how to be a better listener.

While there are many ways to construct a list of suggestions, we will consider them in terms of what works best in three major categories:

1. What you *think* about listening.
2. What you *feel* about listening.
3. What you *do* about listening.

You can learn to listen effectively; look now at the components of that learning: thinking, feeling, doing.

What You *Think* about Listening

Although thinking, feeling, and doing go hand in hand, the thinking (or cognitive) domain of learning is perhaps the best place to begin. After all, effective listening takes effort—it requires maximum thinking power. Here are six suggestions.

1. *Understand the complexities of listening.* Most of us take good listening for granted. Therefore, we don't work very hard at improving. But listening is a complex activity, and its complexity explains the emphasis given in previous chapters to understanding the fallacies, processes, and types of listening.

Knowing the fallacies about listening can keep you from being trapped by them. Knowing that the process involves more than just receiving messages will help you focus on not just receiving, but the other components as well. Recognizing the five major types of listening will help you to consciously direct your energies toward the type of listening required for the circumstance of the moment.

Listening requires an active response, not a passive one. Effective listening doesn't just happen; it takes thought—and thinking can be hard work. But there is no other way to become an effective listener. Think about the complexities of listening, and work to understand them.

2. *Prepare to Listen.* Preparation consists of three phases—long-term, mid-term, and short-term. We said earlier that becoming an effective listener is a lifetime endeavor; in other words, expanding your listening ability will be an ongoing task. But there are two things you can do to improve your listening skills for the long term: (a) practice listening to difficult material and (b) build your vocabulary.

Too many people simply do not challenge their listening ability. Since most of today's radio and television programs do not require concentrated or careful listening, your listening skills do not improve through continued exposure to them. And you have to stretch if you want to grow. Force yourself to listen carefully to congressional debates, lectures, sermons, or other material that requires concentration.

Building your vocabulary will improve your conversational skills and your reading skills as well as your listening skills. And the more words you learn, the better listener you will become.

Mid-term preparation for listening requires that you do the necessary background study before the listening begins. Background papers, prebriefs, and an advance look at a hard copy (or an electronic display) of briefing slides or charts will assist you in being ready to listen.

Short-term preparation may be defined as an immediate readiness to listen. When the speaker's mouth opens, you should open your ears. That is not the time to be hunting for a pen, reading a letter from home, or thinking about some unrelated subject. Good listeners—really good listeners—are in the “spring-loaded position to listen.” It is important to *prepare* to listen.



3. *Adjust to the situation.* No listening situation is exactly the same as another. The time, the speaker, the message—all change. But many other variables also affect listening, though less obviously so: physiological variables such as rest, hunger, comfort, endurance; psychological variables such as emotional stability, rapport with the speaker, knowledge of the subject; and physical factors such as size and color of the

room. Obviously, some of these things will have a positive effect on your listening while others will have a negative effect.

A thick foreign accent, poor grammar, a room with poor acoustics, and the subject of the previous speaker—all may present special barriers to effective listening. However, being aware of the barriers and thinking about how to overcome them can help you improve the situation.

Good listeners are never trapped into thinking that any communication transaction or listening situation is exactly like any other. The Grecian philosopher Heraclitus said it well: “You can’t step into the same stream twice.” Things change. By thinking about the unique factors of the situation, you can do your most effective job as a listener. Adjust to the situation!

4. *Focus on ideas or key points.* At times, you may understand the process, you may have prepared well, and you may be able to adjust to the situation—yet you fail as a listener. This failure results because you didn’t listen to the right things. For example, you may remember a funny story the speaker told to make a point; but you missed the point.

Others boast, “I listen only for the facts.” By concentrating exclusively on individual supporting facts, they may actually miss the main ideas. Facts A, B, and C may be interesting in their own right, but the speaker’s reason for offering them is usually to develop a generalization from them. Generalizations, not facts, are usually most important.

In studies conducted some years ago at the University of New Mexico, I discovered that students who did best on all but rote memory examinations were those who listened for key points and ideas. Interestingly, those who attempted to memorize minute details did only slightly better on low-level rote memory exams than the individuals who focused on ideas—and they did much worse when long-term retention was the criterion. While there are some exceptions, as when listening for directions to someone’s house or memorizing a mathematical formula, it is usually best to focus on ideas or key points.

5. *Capitalize on the speed differential.* Thought can operate much faster than speech. An average person may speak two or three words a second—120 to 180 words a minute. In bursts of enthusiasm, we may even speak a little faster. Most public speakers speak somewhat slower, especially to large audiences. Yet most listeners can process up to 500 words per minute, depending on the nature and difficulty of the material.

I have a machine that compresses speech on tape, but without the distortions normally associated with fast forwarding a tape or simply playing a tape or record at a faster speed. Compression is accomplished through systematic

removal of small segments—so small that distortion is not noticed by listeners. Experiments in which listening time is cut in half—an hour lecture is listened to in half the time—reveal little, if any, significant loss in listening and learning. Admittedly, listeners are ready for a break because there is no time for their minds to wander. Effective listening requires hard thinking, especially if the material is challenging.

The results of these experiments point to the possibility of capitalizing on the speed differential. Unfortunately, the differential between speed of thought and speed of speech promotes daydreaming or concentrating on something other than what is being said. This is not the case with good listeners, however; they use the time differential to good advantage. They summarize, anticipate, and formulate questions based on the speaker's message. This type of time usage may explain why top listeners at the Air War College recently reported that they learned more from lectures than from any other method of instruction. They have learned to capitalize on the speed differential.

6. *Organize material for learning.* Obviously, speakers can enhance listening through careful organization and presentation of ideas. And if questions are appropriate, you can seek clarification of any points you fail to understand. Often, however, questioning is not permitted or, perhaps due to time constraints or the size of the audience, is inappropriate. What can you do?

Remembering that the speed differential exists, you can arrange the material in your mind or in your notes as it's being presented. This will help you understand and remember it later. You can prepare yourself to retain the information to be presented by asking these questions: What point is the speaker trying to make? What main ideas should I remember? How does this information relate to what I already know?

Reorganizing the material you need to learn, and seeking relationships between the new material and what you already know, requires concentrated thinking. It is easier to simply "tune out." There was a time in my early college years when I could not, "for the life of me," see the relevance of some required classes to my course of study. A professor for whom I had great respect explained it to me this way: "John, someday you will come to understand that all information is part of a large mosaic or universe of knowledge. When that happens, you will value all learning. Always look for how the information relates to what you already know and what you need to know, and you will always find something." You know what? He was right!

What You *Feel* about Listening

We began by discussing what you think about listening because effective listening requires rigorous cognitive processing, or thought. But possession of the sharpest mind will not make you a good listener if your feelings are wrong. In other words, what you feel about listening is important. Here are six suggestions for improving your “feel” for listening.

1. *Want to listen.* This suggestion is basic to all others, for it simply says that you must have an intent to listen. We can all recall having been forced to listen to a speech or a briefing that we didn’t really want to listen to. And listening under duress seldom results in understanding or enjoyment, although there are exceptions. Perhaps you have attended a meeting or a social event out of a sense of duty, yet found it to have been profitable. The reason? Probably, since you were there, you decided to make the best of the situation; that is, you made up your mind to listen.

Sometimes you don’t want to listen. At other times, your actions may indicate that you don’t want to listen when you really do. And at still other times, you may be unaware that you don’t want to listen. All three of these situations are affective or attitudinal; that is, they involve your feelings about listening.

Individuals often stop by my office and ask if they can talk for a few minutes. Perhaps they are seeking advice, telling about a project, or seeking clarification on a directive. Whatever the case, if I am not meeting with someone else or working against a deadline, I invite them in. But I must honestly admit that my mind sometimes wanders and I find myself looking at phone messages, fiddling with a paper clip, or looking at my guest with a blank stare. The visitor usually becomes uneasy, hurries the discussion, and offers to come back another time. I protest that I am really listening, but my actions betray me. It is difficult—indeed, nearly impossible—to really listen if you don’t have a mind to. You must *want* to listen.

2. *Delay judgment.* There are times when you must be a critical or judgmental listener. You must weigh the merits of what the speaker is saying. At times, you must make crucial decisions based on what you hear. There are also times when you must judge the speaker. Job interviews, campaign promises, speech contests—all are examples of where judgment of the speaker is important. The problem is, though, that you may be judgmental when you shouldn’t be. You may judge the speaker instead of the content, or you may form judgments before the speaker has finished.

A boy who was one month shy of being 16 decided to confess to his father that he had driven the family car on the previous night. His younger sister’s

promised ride to gymnastics class hadn't arrived, and it was the night of her final rehearsal before a performance. So he made the decision to take her even though he did not yet have a driver's license. He was also quite sure that he hadn't been seen and would never be found out. Still, his conscience was bothering him and his family had stressed honesty and openness. He decided to tell his father.

Upon hearing that the boy had taken the car, his father became furious. He scarcely heard the reason, and he failed to consider that the boy had taken it upon himself to confess. He told the boy that the act would delay his getting a driver's license by two months.

Then the father rethought the situation and said, "Son, I acted hastily. My emotions got the best of me. You were wrong to drive the car because you broke the law. But, frankly, I am proud of you for three reasons: you got your sister to gymnastics rehearsal, you were honest about it, and you are my son."

Supervisors often wonder why people in their organization won't level with them. They need only to consider the messenger in ancient Rome who paid with his life for bringing bad news. An ancient Turkish proverb says, "messenger with bad news should keep one foot in the stirrup." Delaying judgment and judging the content rather than the speaker will lead to better listening and more honest communication.

3. *Admit your biases.* Let's face it: Everyone is human! We all have likes and dislikes; some things turn us on, others turn us off. These characteristics are natural and to be expected. The problem comes when we let our biases—our likes and dislikes—get in the way of understanding the speaker's message.

For example, suppose you have had three bad experiences with people from Chicago and you learn that the speaker you have come to hear is from Chicago. You may have a tendency to immediately distrust him, or to discredit whatever he has to say. Only by admitting your prejudice against people from Chicago will you be able to think beyond your past experience and listen effectively to what this speaker has to say.

Before you reject the above example as irrelevant, consider a time in your past when you got sick after eating a certain food. You knew the sickness was caused by a virus and not the food, but it was quite a while before that food again tasted good to you. In a similar way, bias from past experience can influence what you hear and the meaning you derive from it. If you want to be an effective listener, you must know and admit your biases.

4. *Don't tune out "dry" subjects.* Whenever you are tempted to "tune out" something because you think it will be boring or useless, remember that you cannot evaluate the importance of the message until you have heard it. By then, it is probably too late to ask the speaker to repeat everything that was said; the opportunity to listen effectively will have passed. As was stated earlier, you must *intend* to listen.

Here are several things you can do to stay focused, even if the subject seems dry.

- a. Put yourself in the speaker's place. Try to see the speaker's point of view, and try to understand the speaker's attitude toward the subject.
- b. Review frequently what the speaker has said. Try to summarize the message as the speaker would summarize it.
- c. Constantly ask yourself positive questions about what the speaker is saying: How can I use this information? How can I share this information with others? What else could be said about this subject?
- d. Ask yourself, "What does the speaker know that I don't?"
- e. Find at least one major application or conclusion from every message you hear. In other words, ask "what's in this message for me?" Then find the answer.
- f. Listen as though you are going to be required to present the same message to a different audience later.

Effective listeners have discovered the value of listening to messages they might have initially considered to be "dry." Sometimes the messages aren't so dry after all. And even when they are, there still may be something of value in them.

5. *Accept responsibility for understanding.* Don't assume this attitude: "Here I am! Teach me—if you can." Such listeners believe knowledge can be poured into them as water is poured into a jug. And they believe the responsibility rests with the one doing the pouring; that is, they believe it is the speaker's fault if effective listening does not occur.

Admittedly, the basic assumption in *Speaking Effectively: A Guide for Air Force Speakers* is that the speaker bears a large responsibility for how well the

audience listens. And the speaker's clear organization, engaging support materials, and appropriate delivery do in fact aid listening. But good listeners *are* good because they accept the responsibility for listening and understanding.

6. *Encourage others to talk.* This point applies to those situations in which you find yourself “one-on-one,” in a small group discussion, or any other setting that requires exchanges of vocal communication. But you can't listen if no one is talking. The first two guidelines of this section (communicating that you want to listen and being willing to delay judgment) are sources of encouragement to speakers. The discussion below covers several other things you can do.

- a. Stop talking. You can't listen if you're talking.
- b. Give positive feedback. Look and act interested. Positive head nods, alertness, and smiles—all offer encouragement to the speaker.
- c. Ask questions. Questions that show interest and attention encourage both speaker and listener. Show your interest.
- d. Empathize with the speaker. Put yourself in the speaker's place; this will help you understand the message.
- e. Keep confidences. If the information is sensitive, don't share it with others.
- f. Share information. We tend to tell things to those who tell us things. So if you want the speaker to share information with you, share information with the speaker.

What You *Do* about Listening

What we think about listening and what we feel about listening are both fundamental to skillful listening. But the skills themselves are *crucial*. Skills form the psychomotor—the “doing”—element of listening. Here are six crucial skills.

1. *Establish eye contact with the speaker.* Studies show that listening has a positive relationship with eye contact. In other words, the better eye contact you have with the speaker, the better you will listen. And while eye contact is especially important in relationship listening, it is also important for the other kinds of listening: informative, appreciative, critical, discriminative.

There are several things you can do to establish positive eye contact with the speaker:

- a. In one-on-one or small group settings, sit or stand where you can look directly at the person doing the speaking.
- b. In large groups, sit to the front and center of the audience. You can more easily establish eye contact with the speaker from this vantage point.
- c. Don't get so involved in taking notes that you fail to look often at the speaker. The speaker's gestures, movements, and facial expression are often an important part of the message.
- d. Resist the temptation to let something about the room, or objects within and around the room, distract you. Focus on the speaker and the message.
- e. Don't look at others who enter or leave while the speaker is speaking. This practice not only interrupts your train of thought—it adds to the distraction of the speaker.
- f. Speakers sometimes exhibit a visual aid too soon, or neglect to remove it when they have finished using it. Focus on the visual aid only when it is an asset to the point being discussed.

A final point deserves discussion: Never sleep when someone is talking to you! This point may seem self-evident. But let's face it—in the “busyness” of our lives, we tend to become passive whenever we listen. Passivity promotes reduced attention, which in turn allows drowsiness to occur. In most cases, it is better to stand up, or even to leave the room, rather than fall asleep.

2. *Take notes effectively.* Some people recommend that you not take notes so you can focus your attention wholly on what the speaker is saying. This practice works well for listeners who are blessed with a great memory; most of us aren't. Taking notes will not only help you remember, it will help you organize what the speaker is saying. And it may even aid your understanding and retention—after all, effective note taking will require you to think.

There are many different ways to take notes; for example, linear outlining, mindmapping, and key word methodology. Ask different people what method they use, then find what works best for you. Whatever method you select or devise, several things are worth considering.

a. Don't attempt to write everything down. As mentioned earlier, effective listeners focus on the key ideas or main points.

b. Write clearly enough that you can understand your writing later. If not, make certain that you allow time to decipher your notes before they grow "cold." It's disheartening to review your notes two weeks later only to find that they make no sense.

c. Don't rely on listening later to a tape of the speech. Think! Will you have the time? Looking at your notes for five minutes is generally sufficient, and is much more time-efficient than listening to the entire speech again.

d. Circle or highlight the most important points.

3. *Be a physically involved listener.* Just what does this statement mean? As you have already seen, listening requires more than just hearing. You have also seen that making eye contact and taking notes will help to keep you from becoming passive. But there is more: Active listening takes energy and involvement.

Here are some physical behaviors that will ensure your involvement and help your listening.

a. Use good posture. Sit up straight, yet comfortably. Good posture aids breathing and alertness. It also communicates positive interest to the speaker.

b. Follow the speaker. If the speaker moves, turn your head or rotate in your chair to maintain eye contact and attention. This movement also aids in keeping you alert.

c. Don't be a deadpan. Facial expressions, head nods, and tilts of the head show your involvement and provide positive feedback to the speaker.

d. Use your hands not only to take notes, but to show approval by applause when appropriate.

e. Participate when audience involvement is encouraged. Ask questions. Respond when a show of hands is called for. Be an active listener.

f. Smile.



4. *Avoid negative mannerisms.* Everyone has mannerisms. Watch anyone for a period of time and you will be convinced of this fact. If your mannerisms do not cause a negative reaction, don't worry about them. If a mannerism is positive or encouraging and brings a positive response, make a mental note to do it more often. Unfortunately, some mannerisms are negative or distracting. These should be

avoided.

Here are some examples of listener mannerisms that either hinder listening or have a negative impact—on the speaker or on other listeners. Avoid these mannerisms.

- a. Fidgeting, tapping a pencil, or playing with a rubber band or some other object. The effect on you may be neutral, but such things distract other listeners and are an annoyance to the speaker.
- b. Continually looking at the clock or your watch.
- c. Reading a paper, balancing a checkbook, rearranging items in your wallet, or engaging in other behavior which takes focus away from the speaker.
- d. Displays of arrogance, superiority, or lack of interest in the speaker and message.

In short, any mannerism or behavior that detracts from the speaker or the message should be avoided. Such things hinder the speaker, divert the attention of other listeners, and prevent you from being the best listener you can be.

5. *Exercise your listening muscles.* Actually, there are no muscles technically involved with listening—but this thought reminds us that listening takes practice. Just as an athlete must work out regularly and a musician must practice daily, so you must work consistently to be an effective listener.

But consistent practice in itself is not enough. The difficulty of the message is also important. Exposure to challenging material and difficult listening situations will stretch your ability and build your listening muscles. For example, suppose you knew that you would be required to carry a 50-pound weight one hundred yards in less than a minute. You wouldn't practice by

carrying a 30-pound weight. You would practice by carrying at least a 50-pound weight, and you probably would condition yourself to carry it more than 100 yards in less than a minute. With this kind of practice, you would be more than equal to the task. And so it is with listening: Practice to *at least* the level you will be required to perform—perhaps a bit above.

Finally, “s-t-r-e-t-c-h” your vocabulary. We’ve said this before, but nothing will pay greater listening dividends. Learn the meanings of new words and acronyms. Listen to and read material that contains challenging words. Keep a dictionary nearby. Look up new words as you read them, or jot them down as you listen so you can look up the meanings later.

6. *Follow the Golden Rule.* Do to others as you would have them do to you. The central focus of all effective communication is “other directedness.” There are exceptions to most other listening rules. For example, there are times when a listener shouldn’t prepare; preparation may prevent openness to new ideas. There are times when the objective is not to focus on key points, but to listen for subordinate ideas or supporting material. There are times when we should not delay judgment—we must act! But while these and other rules have exceptions, not so for the Golden Rule. The effective listener is *always* other directed, focused on the other person.

Be the kind of listener you want others to be when you are talking. Ask “How would I want others to listen to me?” That’s how to be an effective listener.