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**This module helps
you understand:**

The definition of listening

The difference between
listening and hearing

Why listening is important

The identifying
characteristics of effective
and ineffective listeners

The components of
the process of listening

The five types of listening

The barriers to
effective listening

To apply the strategies for
becoming an active listener

To use effective
note taking skills

To demonstrate the
ability to critically listen
to a public speaker

To know and be able to
detect bias in the media

Listening: The “Lost” Communication Skill

Of all the communication skills we use regularly, listening ranks at the top in importance. And yet, somehow, in the rush to speak and argue for action, listening has gotten lost and its salience forgotten—listening is after all a passive activity, isn't it? The focus of most traditional communication studies has been on the speaker. After all it is the speaker who manages communication, especially in the public arena where discussion of facts, values, and issues of policy formation occur. We cannot emphasize enough the critical nature of effective listening. Like the old story of the baseball umpire calling pitches—“they ain't nothing 'til I calls em”—the words of the speaker aren't meaningful until they have been attended to, interpreted and understood by the listener. Without listeners there would be no need for speakers.

The listening perspective in a communication situation can be seen as a mirror of the speaking perspective. The speaker has a purpose and goals for speaking, the speaker considers the occasion, the situation, and the audience. All of that gets mirrored when we consider the perspective of the listener. We can talk about the listener's purpose and goals, as well as the listening occasion and situation. Where the speaker considers the audience, the listener must consider knowledge of the speaker.

In this module we will deal with listening in two parts. The first part will take account of listening in general and the shortcomings of listeners. Basically, this will include a definition and description of listening and a discussion of the problems the listener must overcome to be an effective listener.

The last part of the module presents what a listener should do to be a critical listener in the classroom and society. We give guidelines for effective listening in public speaking and/or mediated situations where the listener is part of an audience. We ask the listener to evaluate their present listening skill set and ask what would be necessary in order to be a critical (thinker) listener: consideration of personal biases, the need to weigh multiple points of view, to be intellectually humble and contingent about differing points of view, and to give consideration to the situation, the content and the speaker's rhetorical strategy and tactics.

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This module will also have a positive bias: listeners are active. It will contend that all listening is and should be an engaged activity for effective communicators. With practice listeners can become active and aware rather than passive and unconscious

Defining Listening

The first communication skill we engage in the moment we are born is listening. It is how we learn and acquire language. Speaking and listening, then, are always interrelated. However, although it is our first communicative behavior, listening is usually our most underdeveloped communication skill. The International Listening Association (www.listen.org) defines *listening* as *the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages* (1996). Because we cannot physically shut down our auditory perceptions, it might be easy to assume that we are always in a state of listening. Individuals, however, have the ability to appear to be listening when they are actually just hearing. What is the difference between *hearing* and *listening*? The terms *hearing* and *listening* are often used interchangeably in everyday life, but in order to learn how to listen effectively, it is important to understand the differences between both activities. Until quite recently, not very much was known about the process of listening. While speech instruction is common—we teach our children how to speak a language, for example—there has been little instruction related to listening.

Hearing, essentially a physiological process, *involves three interconnected stages: reception of sound waves, perception of sound in the brain, and auditory association* (Brownell, 2006, 77). The mechanics of hearing, of course, are a prerequisite to all listening purposes. Studies conducted in the late 1960s, however, have demonstrated that hearing proficiency is largely unrelated to listening competency. In other words, levels of hearing ability have very little to do with listening skills. It is important to keep in mind that regardless of hearing levels, individuals can—and often do—tune out any noise that causes them boredom or discomfort. It would be accurate to say that individuals with some hearing loss might actually be more competent listeners than individuals with normal levels of hearing. Though the same series of studies found differences between *listening for facts* and *creative listening*, in general, effective listening skills overall were correlated with intelligence. (Ross, 1964). Thus, while hearing is mostly physiological in nature, listening is a psychological act. What are the psychological characteristics of an effective listener? Judi Bromwell (2006) finds that effective listeners “are open-minded and interested in a wide variety of subjects. They tend to like people and have a generally positive attitude” (52). Therefore, “willingness” to listen is crucial for competent listening, as well as a positive psychological disposition. On the other hand, anxiety and stress interfere with the ability to listen (Bromwell, 2006).

Other listening scholars have also researched the traits and characteristics of competent or effective listeners. Michael Purdy, author of *Listening in Everyday Life*, has found that effective listening skills increase individual power, as after all, “speakers have little power without listeners.” Purdy conducted a study of 900 college students ages 17 to 70 in the late 1990s, which highlighted the twelve characteristics of competent and ineffective listeners. These are, in order of importance:

A competent listener:

1. Uses eye contact appropriately.
2. Is attentive and alert to a speaker’s verbal and nonverbal behavior.
3. Is patient and does not interrupt, waiting for the speaker to finish.
4. Is responsive, using verbal and nonverbal expressions.
5. Asks questions in a nonthreatening tone.
6. Paraphrases, restates or summarizes what the speaker says.

Listening is a largely subjective experience.

7. Provides constructive verbal and nonverbal feedback.
8. Is empathic, makes an effort to understand the speaker.
9. Demonstrates interest in the speaker as a person.
10. Demonstrates a caring attitude and is willing to listen.
11. Does not criticize, is nonjudgmental.
12. Is open-minded.

An ineffective listener:

1. Interrupts the speaker, demonstrates impatience.
2. Does not make eye contact, allows his or her eyes to wander.
3. Is distracted and/or fidgety, does not pay attention to the speaker.
4. Is not interested in the speaker.
5. Gives the speaker little or no verbal and/or nonverbal feedback.
6. Changes the subject.
7. Is judgmental.
8. Is close-minded.
9. Talks too much.
10. Is self-preoccupied.
11. Gives unwanted advice.
12. Is too busy to listen.

Listening Is a Process

In her research on listening comprehension, Caren Feyten (1991) finds that meaning is constructed, by speakers as well as listeners, through communicative exchanges that include linguistics, such as spoken words; paralinguistics, such as tone of voice, intonation and pitch; and via nonverbal communication, such as body language (175). In *Effective Listening: Key to Your Success* (1983), Lyman Steil, Larry Barker and Kittie Watson identify four interconnected activities as essential to the process of listening:

1. **Sensing**, the first step, *is the actual reception of verbal and nonverbal messages.*
2. **Interpreting** *is the practice of understanding the message.*
3. **Evaluating** refers to *the process of sorting facts*, information that can be verified, from opinion. Evaluating also involves concurring or rejecting the speaker's message.
4. **Responding** *is the process of reacting with verbal and nonverbal cues to the message.*

While hearing can be measured with audiometric instruments, listening is a largely subjective experience. Thus, the first three steps of the listening activities cannot be directly evaluated or examined, as they are hidden from our view. Because most listening behaviors cannot be measured, the last, *responding*, becomes essential for the speaker to determine if he or she "has been successful in getting his or her point across" (36). We will speak more about this later in the module.

Although, the first part of listening process, sensing, is about reception, when we are focusing on what we can do to be better listeners this step is best expressed as an active perceptual process—attention.

Attention: Active Sensing

Attention is another crucial component to effective listening. In order to engage in effective listening behaviors, we need to be willing and able to focus or concentrate our awareness. These are elements of *attention*. Farrow (1963) defines **attention** as *that mental state in which there is an intense voluntary direction and concentration of consciousness upon an object* (20). That is, attention requires effort and focus, a certain discipline. As a result, we develop an increased clarity of perception. The opposite of attention is *mindlessness*. Langer (1989) and

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Brownell (2006) have identified **mindlessness**, a *state in which individuals rely heavily on preconceived notions, to the extent that they fail to listen to their environment*. Mindlessness, then, interferes with the listening process. In other words, in order to be competent listeners, we must ensure that our internal predispositions are not interfering with the listening process.

Another obstacle to attention is **noise**, *the aggregate of sound and auditory stimuli around us*. Our brains must filter auditory information from background noise and focus on a limited number of auditory stimuli at any particular time. Otherwise, overloaded with sensory information, our brains would be rendered unable to function. Therefore, we develop selective attention, a state of sensory filtering during which we attend to those auditory cues that arouse our interest, relegating the rest to the background noise. In other words, we select what we hear from a vast array of possibilities. A negative side effect of this situation is that in our desire to attend to several things at the same time, we often process the messages partially or inaccurately. The result is that we fail to hear what is really important. Individuals often find that it is simply not enough to pay attention; we need to discern what to listen for. In other words, we need to define our listening goals (see below on defining listening goals). More often than not, the combination of selective attention and missing out on the “right” information will have an adverse effect on our listening ability and lead us to errors and misunderstandings.

Mindfulness, often defined as *a state in which we are neither judging nor thinking but rather wholly present in the moment*, is an important strategy that helps us to enhance our attentiveness powers and improve listening skills. Mindfulness helps individuals listen for whole ideas rather than partial details, discern fact from opinion, and keep an open mind in order to avoid indulging in snap judgments. Effective listening is always mindful. Mindful listening increases comprehension and can help us identify ideas. Listening for ideas is akin to listening for themes in music, for the musical notes and lyrics that shape the theme. A skill that improves with practice, listening for ideas involves being attentive to the coherence and continuity of the discursive structures we listen to. Knowing how to reduce distractions is of paramount importance for mindful listening. Brownell (2006) identifies some tactics that may help us reduce distractions:

1. Eliminate external distractions by turning off the radio or moving to a quieter area.
2. Sit toward the front of the room, where it is easier to hear.
3. Make sure that you are comfortable and there is enough light.
4. Have a paper and pencil handy so that as you think of things you need to do you can write them down and take them off your mind.
5. Repeat portions of the speaker’s message to yourself silently. It forces you to think of what the speaker is saying and store it in your memory.
6. Repeat key ideas. Practice using the speaker’s natural pauses to mentally highlight what was said.
7. Stay mentally involved and physically alert.

And last but not least, take a sincere interest in people and ideas! Remember that “part of open-mindedness is realizing that new facts and ideas may change or modify currently held beliefs” (240).

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Brownell also identifies four tactics that speakers may use in order to keep listeners focused:

1. **Repetition.** Listeners will pay more attention to a sound that is repeated rather than to one that has been heard only once. Be careful of repeating too much, however, as prolonged exposure may deaden interest.
2. **Change.** Speakers can use a variation in pitch, volume and speed to provide emphasis. Nowadays, use of technology such as slides presentations offer alternative ways of introducing a change in tempo.
3. **Novelty.** Find ways of arousing the listeners' curiosity and interest. People often concentrate more when faced with unfamiliar patterns and circumstances. In other words, when expectations are fully met, listeners become less attentive.
4. **Intensity.** Intensity, or *making emphasis of sound*, adds another dimension of auditory attraction. It also helps listeners focus on and remember key information.

Finally, the speaker should structure the content of his or her speech around the possible listening purposes of the audience: listening to gain information, listening to analyze or evaluate, listening for empathy, or listening for entertainment.

Evaluation and Interpretation.

We need to engage in careful listening in order to understand and evaluate the message. Once the listener has defined his or her listening goals and absorbed the information, he or she will probably proceed to make judgments and evaluations, sort information, find uses and applications, and discard or file the information for future reference (Prescott, Potter, and Franks, 1968). Contrary to many common expectations, listening is not a passive activity. We are constantly engaging in interpretation and meaning-making as we listen, and our listening engagement relies heavily on our environmental contexts and our listening goals. Researchers describe many different types of listening behaviors. Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley (1982, 9) identified five types of listening:

1. **Discriminative listening** allows individuals to separate fact, which is provable information, from opinion, which is more subjective and ambiguous.
2. **Comprehensive listening** is necessary for individuals to understand the message. This includes differentiating between vocal sounds in order to comprehend the emotional content of the message.
3. **Critical or evaluative listening** is used to evaluate a message before accepting or rejecting it.
4. **Therapeutic listening** allows the individual to listen without judging. The purpose of therapeutic listening is to help the speaker change or progress in some way.
5. **Appreciative listening** allows individuals to listen for entertainment or enjoyment, such as when we listen to poetry or music.

Not all types of listening are equally effective. **Active listening**, also known as **reflective listening**, is the *skill of listening closely* and reflecting back the information to the speaker. In *Developing the Fine Art of Listening*, Hal Ritter Jr. and Patricia Wilson (2006) explain that when engaged in active listening, the listener mirrors or reflects the information by re-stating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said, followed by a question to check for the accuracy of what we thought we heard. Such listening behavior greatly reduces miscommunication and errors in perception by clarifying the message and creating common ground.

Listening scholars recognize meaningful differences in active listening behaviors. In his work, Carl Rogers (1962) writes eloquently of the need to abandon an egocentric perspective when listening, which better allows us to comprehend the opposing point of view. Such listening, in his view, challenges preconceived assumptions as individuals are to take in the world around them. As a result of a deeply engaged active listening, individuals gradually experience greater listening competency as well as growth towards valuable modes of understanding. Essential to

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this model is the notion of *empathy*, a *feeling*, perhaps intuitive, *in which one individual identifies with another*, in other words, “one feels with and for that person” (Hobart and Fahlberg, 1965, 596). Because Rogers finds that this type of listening activity increases our empathic understanding of others he named it emphatic listening. In Rogers’ view, individuals will stop listening if they become angry or defensive. An effective speaker has the power to coax its audience closer to a model of emphatic listening. If a speaker wants to be really effective, he or she must be more concerned with communicating and encouraging an open and active listening behavior than in egocentric behaviors such as lecturing the audience.

Relational or dialogic listening, also a type of active listening, *takes into account the whole listening environment and seeks to enhance personal relationships*. Relationships are built through conversations, and relational or dialogic listening seeks to learn about and from the other individual in the relationship in order to further enhance mutual understanding and communication. Other scholars extend the definition of *relational listening* to *relational communication*, *where listening and speaking occur simultaneously in face-to-face human interaction* (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993, 107). The relational model of communication recommends that even if you believe you have learned all there is to know about another individual in a relationship with you, you should be open to modifying your assumptions and conclusions based on new information acquired in each communicative exchange (Bromwell, 2006, 182).

You may have noticed by now that therapeutic, emphatic and relational listening build upon overlapping listening skills, such as discriminative, comprehensive, critical and active listening. Finally, on the opposite end of the effective listening skills described above is *negative listening*, identified by Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (1985) as *listening egocentrically or from a self-centered perspective, engaging in negative attitudes such as feelings of superiority and negative behaviors, such as constantly interrupting, verbal aggression, and apathy*.

Response

Individuals judge the listening ability of others by their responses. Thus, responding in socially appropriate ways may enhance the communication flow, whether responding inappropriately is likely to affect communication adversely. Appropriate listening responses are an important component of listening and actually do enhance our listening skills. Positive listening behaviors include, when appropriate, signaling to let the speaker know that we are attentive, demonstrating by our behavior and demeanor that we are listening. It is important to keep in mind, however, that socially appropriate responses may vary across individuals and cultures. Learning new ways of responding works wonders in enhancing communication skills. Recognizing your own levels of comfort is also important. Expanding your range of response behaviors should work within the behavioral range of what is comfortable for you; otherwise, your responsive behavior might be perceived as forced and artificial.

One of the most common ways of signaling attention is through nonverbal communication. Brownell (2006) identifies the following nonverbal behaviors as behaviors that will say “I’ll listen”:

1. Direct eye contact.
2. Smiling.
3. Nodding.
4. Eyes wide open.
5. Forward lean.
6. Positive facial expression.

The most constructive response would be a response that demonstrated that you had listened to the other person's viewpoint and considered it carefully.

The following behaviors impede effective communication:

1. Stare.
2. Yawn.
3. Looking away.
4. Nervous habits, fidgeting.
5. Shaking head negatively.
6. Moving away from speaker.
7. Negative facial expression, such as frowning or pouting.
8. Crossed arms.

Some other appropriate listening responses include:

1. **Paraphrasing**, *re-wording what the speaker has said and mirroring the message in your own words*. An example would be, in the case of a student stating "My professor makes me feel as if I were invisible!" to respond by stating, "I hear you feel that you feel your professor does not listen to you." Paraphrasing reduces miscommunication, coaxes listeners away from an ego-centered vision by forcing him or her to concentrate on the speaker, and helps listeners remember on the speakers' message. Paraphrasing is also an excellent memory aid, helping the mind remember important information through repetition.
2. **Open questions** are *questions that do not require a yes or no answer*. Yes or no answers reduce our opportunities to gain important information. On the other hand, because they open doors to communication, open questions are ideal for active listening behaviors, such as emphatic listening and therapeutic listening. One example would be to ask "What is it that you like about your work?" rather than "Do you like your work?"
3. **Paralinguistics**. Modulate your elocution. The way you sound to others, that is, *the volume, pitch and speed rate of your speech* is affected by emotion and may alter the listeners' perception of your intended message. Keep calm and practice maintaining an adequate and balanced tone of voice.
4. **Offering constructive feedback**. Feedback should be provided as soon as possible and be descriptive, not judgmental. Effective feedback is clear, specific, and does not focus on personal characteristics. Rather than state "Sue, your presentation was great" it would be preferable to say, "Sue, what I liked most about your presentation was how well-organized it was and the way the graphics helped clarify the quantitative data."

Indeed, Brownell (2006) suggests that the most constructive response would be a response that demonstrated that you had listened to the other person's viewpoint and considered it carefully. A response which is also personal would be most satisfactory especially if it were also clear, respectful, and honest (283).

Barriers to effective listening

In the listening process there are things that interfere with or get in the way of effective listening. We call these situational thoughts and actions barriers to listening. In any situation, barriers prevent effective communication. These barriers can be within ourselves (psychological), in the communication situation or environment (such as noise or other distractions), or they can be learned from our social or cultural associations and influences (like reactions to stereotypical labels or ethnocentric rituals).

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The most salient listening barriers for most people are psychological, *intra*-personal, or situational. These can include intrapersonal distractions such as interior “noise,” semantic noise, information overload, perceptions of the speaker, or self perceptions and personal biases that get in the way of listening to others. There are also situational noise/distractions, physical and otherwise that should be managed if we are to listen at our best.

Noise: Interior and Semantic

Intrapersonal noise can include *anything that interferes with our attention* (or sensing, as defined in the process of listening defined above) or gets in the way of understanding a speaker’s message. Without attention, or focused reception, as we learned above, listening is not very effective. So a listener whose mind is wondering or who fails to concentrate on the speaker only makes listening less effective. One of the main points of this early book on listening, *Listening is a 10 part skill*, by Ralph Nichols (www.listen.org) was that we should concentrate on the ideas and thoughts of the speaker and not get distracted by our own monologues or interior noise. If we are daydreaming while someone is speaking we will miss parts of what is being said. But, also imagine if *you* were speaking and you empathically realized that many in your audience were self absorbed or daydreaming or otherwise not paying attention to you, how would that make you feel as a speaker? How would that change your presentation? A speaker who is paying attention, listening to the audience, will attempt to recapture the audience’s attention with a shift in tone or content—maybe a change of pace and/or a story to engage the audience with a situation to which they can relate.

Semantic noise is *the reaction we have to certain words, labels (or stereotypes) a speaker might use*. These are sometimes called trigger words that distract us from hearing the factual message of the speaker. Semantic refers to the meaning component of a word, as opposed to its connotation or the emotional reaction the word may arouse in a listener. Political correctness seems to be a perennial example; we pay attention to, and sometimes get distracted by, racial, gender, class or political words that are highly charged. “Conservative,” “liberal,” “gay,” “pro-life/choice,” or other emotionally loaded words get the attention and not the ideas being communicated. Political comedians, of course, play with these labels; their intent is humor. To a lesser degree the humor draws attention to the message behind the words, the real meaning. Stereotypes are another type of label that are quick and simplistic ways of referring to an individual or group—stereotypes are always generalizations and do not usually serve anyone well—that may be either positive or negative in connotation. It is the negative stereotype we usually pay attention to, but a good listener tries to see past and listen for more than simplistic generalizations. We might hear words like “Latina/o” or “Hispanic.” When we hear stereotypes like this we should listen and think of the many aspects of the diverse cultural groups referenced. The Spanish or Latin culture is made up of many peoples, from diverse localities, in many countries, with different linguistic variations, life styles, foods, dress, heritages, etc. All of these rich details are lost when we take a stereotype at face value, that is, for its simple connotative value.

Situational noise is *distraction that arises from the physical speaking location* (see above for specific tactics for staying engaged). It is the speaker’s responsibility to do all he/she can to control and eliminate any distractions in the speaking situation—noise from a window, or an adjoining room. Given that the speaker has done what can be done, the listener must work with the speaker to stay focused on the speech—responsibility for the success of a communication situation is the responsibility of all parties to the event. If the speaker is not loud enough, or the sound system turned up enough, or the microphone close enough to the speaker to pick up the voice, the listener can make this known to the speaker. The listener should take responsibility, to the degree it is practical, to insure the ability to hear and listen effectively. If one listener is not able to hear well, others are probably in the same boat.

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Information overload

Information overload is very common today. It can mean a constant, 24/7, flow of information. However, a rich and varied flow of “data” is an important part of being informed in our fast-paced, communication dependent world. We all spend time watching and listening and interacting with screens—email, blogs, TV, movies, videos and games on the internet, mp3 players. (And when we are interacting with other people we are often communicating through media—cell phones, Instant Messaging—not face to face.) All of these inputs can weigh on our ability to take in, or receive (the first part of the definition of listening) and adequately process and evaluate what we take in through our sensory channels. Too much sensory input is called information overload, and like multi-tasking, our ability to be effective listeners goes down the more we have to attend to at one time. Trying to do two things at the same time, such as email while listening to a lecture, significantly reduces the competence and effectiveness of each behavior (<http://www.umich.edu/~bcalab/multitasking.html>). The less alike the tasks are the less efficient we are. Other studies show that “The best thing you can do to improve your memory is to pay attention to the things you want to remember,” said Russell Poldrack, UCLA associate professor of psychology at a National Academy of Sciences meeting (<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/07/060726083302.htm>).

Studies generally find that our listening efficiency and task efficiency both go down when we are interrupted by email, a cell phone call or any other interruption while we are trying to listen. The first part of the process of listening is sensing or reception, and if our attention is not focused (as suggested above) we will not be listening well.

Information overload can also occur if the messages we are listening to are technical in areas where we lack expertise, if there is too much information packed into a message, or if the information comes at us too fast—this could also cause listening apprehension and interfere with our ability to remember the message (see apprehension below). We should not ignore information that is technical. Rather we should prepare for speeches, or lectures which require a high level of expertise or specific knowledge. That is, reading the text and preparing before class will help us to listen and better understand and remember the content of a lecture. If a message is loaded with too much information that may also be the speaker’s lack of consideration for the audience’s ability to process information—each of us has limits, especially when the content is difficult or different from subject to which we usually listen. This too can be at least partially remedied by reading up on a topic before attending a lecture. If we are watching a presidential debate we should study up on the positions of each candidate so that we can listen for the differences.

Speaker Perception

Perceptions of the speaker can be another barrier to effective listening. Plutarch (AD 46–120), the Greek biographer and essayist, who wrote the first full essay on listening (*Essays*, 1992) said: “Learn how to listen and you will prosper even from those who talk badly.” We all know teachers or business speakers who have many space fillers and pauses in their speech—“umh,” “you know,” “let me say this...” Or the speaker is not a great speaker, they are slow and measured, certainly not a motivational speaker. We can, as sometimes happens, label the speaker as uninteresting, not a good speaker, boring, or we can look beyond the perceptions we may have of the speaker. Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States, was said to have the ability to be a strong motivational speaker, to speak like a “camptown preacher.” He didn’t use this ability because he felt that it detracted from the listener’s ability to rationally evaluate the speaker, and for him it was the message, the information and logical argument, that was most important, not the speaker or the speaker’s delivery (this principle derives originally from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*). Of course, a speaker should strive to be interesting, but it is more important for the listener to be able to set aside perceptions of the speaker and listen for the message. Many times a dull speaker has interesting things to say, maybe wisdom to impart, if only we would listen.

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On the other hand, we should not be taken in or entranced by a speaker's appearance, the spin of a message, or the manipulation of a communication event. A carefully crafted speaking image, created through sophisticated polling and marketing has been around, though in a somewhat less sophisticated form, since Senator Richard Nixon's September 23, 1952 Checkers Speech (<http://www.watergate.info/nixon/checkers-speech.shtml>) where he defended himself against charges of taking campaign funds in return for influence in his campaign for Vice President. In this televised speech Nixon carefully played on and manipulated the sentiments and fears (of communism) of his audience to maintain his political image. Some would point to earlier radio fireside chats by President Franklin Roosevelt, however, they played more on the emotion of voice and the imagination of the listener, rather than the visual theatre of Nixon's TV presentation with his dog Checkers, a gift, and references to his wife's republican cloth (as opposed to fur) coat. A listener, then needs to be able to set aside, or evaluate separately, the spin and imagistic aspects of a speaking situation and concentrate on the construction of the message (the second component of the definition of listening), a central point in the development of any speech.

A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he gets to know something. Wilson Mizner (1876-1933)

Self Perceptions and Personal Biases

Self perceptions and personal bias can include anything that is *a barrier or that gets in the way of understanding a speaker's message*. Some typical examples include egocentrism, personal interests, biases/dogmatism, defensiveness and apprehension, or a know-it-all attitude.

Egocentrism is a self-centeredness, *an interest in only what is relevant to our self*. There is no reason why a person cannot be self-centered; having healthy personal interests, except that egocentrism is limiting. If we limit ourselves only to what we like we will never learn to appreciate new experiences and we will also not do well in college, nor will we be good citizens. College by its very nature requires that we continually listen beyond our interests, to explore. Citizenship is similar in that to be well informed we must listen to different points of view, really listen to them, so we know and understand different social and political positions. This is directly analogous to learning to like a new musical style. When we listen to a new musical genre or a new voice (not just a singer, but any voice), we may not like it at first, but the more we listen the more we may like it, until finally it might become one of our favorites. Expanding our taste in topics and speakers listened to is very similar.

Ethnocentrism is akin to egocentrism, but rather than being limited to our own personal interests *we limit ourselves to the interests of our ethnic or cultural group*. Effective listening always requires that we listen first, and that we listen at least long enough to understand a position before we reject it and stop listening. Rejecting a person or their ideas out of hand is not fair to ourselves; it does not give us a chance to appreciate someone or something new—his is analogous to how we learn to appreciate new music.

Personal biases are egocentric, but like self interest they are not necessarily problematic. A bias, or prejudice is simply a preformed opinion based on our own life experience—what we have lived, what we have learned, what we have listened to. The most important thing with bias or prejudice it to be aware of it and to compensate, even overcompensate, for our beliefs and opinions. Of course, this gets complicated and mixed up with stereotypical perceptions of a speaker and their topic. One of the authors recently heard Newt Gingrich on CSPAN speaking to the National Federation of Republican Women (April 5, 2007). With some difficulty this author listened past personal biases about Gingrich, and then listened past the polarizing statements, semantic noise and stereotypes from Gingrich to hear his ideas. Despite prejudices about Gingrich the author was able to listen to the innovative ideas about reinventing government that Gingrich proposed. This is an example of the listening responsibility we need to adopt.

Listening requires that we understand and question our own opinions.

Dogmatism, *opinions we hold without questioning*, is a problematic personal bias. Listening requires that we understand and question our own opinions. Without knowing our own positions we cannot compare and understand them with other speaker's opinions. Defensiveness is a negative reaction to another speaker's ideas based on a lack of awareness of our own dogmatic opinions. Defensiveness, dogmatism are related to listener apprehension. Listener apprehension is a fear or concern about receiving a speaker's message. If we worry about accurately understanding the points of a lecture because we know we will be tested on the information, or if we have listening apprehension in a hiring interview, research by Roberts & Vinson (1998) in the *International Journal of Listening* indicates, that we are not as likely to be willing to listen, or to use effective listening skills (40).

Not many people possess a know-it-all attitude, but most would agree that it is not conducive to being an open, aware, effective listener.

Strategies for Becoming an Effective Listener

All of the strategies for becoming a better listener depend upon the listener defining goals for listening and becoming self-aware (self-monitoring) so that the barriers to listening are obvious and can be managed. After goal-setting and awareness of barriers, there are some general skills that are useful to the critical listener—critical here means aware, intelligent and knowledgeable, not fault-finding, which is a distraction from serious listening. Some of the more important skills are the ability to be appreciative [see above], to remain objective, open and fair-minded, to challenge and ask constructive questions, and maintain intellectual humility in consideration of the multi-dimensionality of issues.

Defining Listening Goals

Defining listening goals is the place to begin as a competent listener. Defining a listening goal means being an active listener and taking responsibility for the outcome of a communication situation. As suggested above a competent listener is not passive but knows the value of being an active partner in a situation. Purdy & Borisoff (1991) recognized in *Listening in Everyday Life* that "listening is a 90-90 proposition—that both the speaker and the listener must take responsibility for effective and accurate communication" (22). This means first identifying what the speaker is trying to do and then figuring out your role and purpose as a listener.

So you should begin with general listening goals. First, the listener should have the goal to prepare for the listening situation, by being physically and mentally prepared to listen, including the desire to listen (without desire or motivation not much happens). Second, the listener should decide what to listen for: 1) Appreciation, 2) Information, 3) Understanding, and/or critical evaluation of information, 4) Evidence, arguments, 5) Mode of presentation, and 6) Situation.

We can apply listening goals with three sets of skills that build upon each other:

1. Self-monitoring (awareness) skills,
2. Skills for appreciation and informational listening (learning), and
3. Skills for critical listening (thinking).

Self-monitor and become self-aware to recognize barriers to effective listening that get in the way of achieving our communication goals. Self-monitoring should include the obvious barriers discussed above, such as emotional reaction, reaction to trigger words (semantic noise), defensive response to unfamiliar or different ideas, and other intrapersonal noise. You should especially be aware of the tendency to jump to conclusions before you have heard all that the speaker has to say. Prejudging was mentioned above as a part of personal bias, but here (and below under critical/evaluative listening) the stress is on listening to the whole of a speech before making a judgment or forming an opinion. We should hear a speaker out so we have the "whole story" before we assume we have an understanding.

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Listening skills for appreciation and information are important in their own right, but are also useful for critical/evaluative listening. Listening to an informative speech such as a lecture, news or other report is a common experience in our day to day lives. Learning from the experience of the speaker demands that we first are receptive to the speaker and more importantly, to his or her ideas.

We think of appreciative listening as appropriate for listening to plays, music or poetry (as suggested above), but appreciation is an attitude that leaves us open and favorable to a speaker and their message. Below we extend this concept as useful to critical listening, but first we discuss skills for informative listening, including “note-taking” skills which are useful for reviewing information or recall of information we want to later remember or evaluate. Recall can also include analog or digital recordings of a presentation, but that means listening to the whole of a presentation again (or skipping to specific parts) when we want to review it, whereas by taking notes we can use various tools such as outlining, visual mapping, summarizing, or reduction to key points/arguments, evidence or facts.

Outlining and Note-taking

Outlining a presentation or lecture is often difficult to do unless the speaker is very clear and organized in the structure of their presentation. However, there are web posting options (Blackboard) that can help. Research by James, Burke and Hutchins (2006) in *Business Communication Quarterly* found that making PowerPoint (PPT) slides and outlines available online before lectures helped students to follow the lecture. Faculty members were concerned that students would not attend lectures if the outline was available but students responded that this would not affect their attendance in class. Overall:

the results indicated that both faculty members and students perceived PPT as having a favorable impact on note taking, recalling content during an exam, emphasizing key lecture points, and holding students’ attention during class (14).

Visual Mapping and Mind Mapping

Visual mapping can be traced to several sources. An older source we are all familiar with is diagramming, as of sentences, but this method can use branching to illustrate major and subordinate ideas—as in the main thought, modifiers and dependent and independent clauses of a sentence. Mind mapping and visual mapping are taught in speed reading and study skills classes as a way to visually display information and information relationships. These skills have been shown in a major meta-analysis to increase knowledge retention significantly (Nesbit & Adesope, 2006). Wikipedia has a good description with illustrations (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map). Or see study skills sites like that at James Cook University (<http://www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/mindmap/index.html>).

Summarizing

Summarizing a presentation is another way to take notes. This method is *the interpretation of what the speaker is saying put into your own words and in a way that preserves what you need to recall from the presentation*. The Gingrich speech to National Federation of Republican Women (mentioned above) can provide an example of this note taking method. A summary of one important section of his speech would look like this:

Newt Gingrich: some good ideas about reforming and modernizing government. He compared the lack of efficiency of the US government to the ability of FedEx and UPS to meticulously track and deliver packages anywhere in the US overnight. He suggested that the government could be streamlined to do better. Here he is making a case for

A speaker's role is often to simplify and focus the topic and arguments of a speech so as to make them easier to listen to and accept.

reform of government and that perhaps certain functions of government should be outsourced where they can be done more efficiently.

This example illustrates how to summarize the major point of a speech and it also implies that critical listening was involved to sort out and highlight this significant argument in Gingrich's speech. The last method of note-taking is especially useful for listening to persuasive presentations and requires critical and evaluative skills.

The last method is a two column method that puts arguments or key points in a left hand column and evidence/"facts." A related method is the Cornell method (Brownell, 2006, 128), in which one takes down details, ideas, thoughts in the right (Record) column and then goes down the left hand (Reduce) column distilling the recorded material to a summary which might be easier to sort through when reviewing notes for a test or writing a paper.

A brief example from the Gingrich speech would look like this:

Reduce Column

Government inefficiency

Record Column

FedEx can exactly track and deliver a package anywhere in the US overnight, why can't the US government deliver services as quickly?

Critical Listening Builds upon Appreciative Listening

Skills for critical listening build upon appreciative listening, a skill we do not usually think of as important for critical listening. If we can appreciate we can learn; if we can learn we can understand; if we can understand we can impartially evaluate and approach a communication situation critically. From this example we can see how appreciative listening is needed for a more complete understanding and a fair-minded evaluation of the speaker's message.

Of course, appreciative listening is not some idealist perspective, but an active listening that leads to an objective critical attitude, including the asking of challenging questions about the ethos/credibility of the speaker, as well as the assumptions, evidence, arguments and conclusions. These are the sort of questions that reverse the persuasive process. A speaker's role is often to simplify and focus the topic and arguments of a speech so as to make them easier to listen to and accept. A listener's role is to find the limits assumed by the speaker and expand them, and then to listen *through* what was said in order to understand the original complexity of the issue. Issues are represented rhetorically as having solutions, listening fleshes out the issues to place them in their multi-faceted, real-world context.

Finally, the awareness of the critical listener also includes the maintenance of a healthy dose of intellectual humility in consideration of the multi-dimensionality of issues. Paul and Elder (2006) frame humility and fair-mindedness as critical listening, "connected to positive insight into the complexity of and many-sidedness of most important world issues and large-scale conflicts. Those who have achieved this state can insightfully role-play multiple perspectives on a multitude of issues" (7).

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Conclusion

In this module we have considered: 1) how people *actually* listen, with all their faults, shortcomings, misperceptions and barriers, 2) how they *should* listen, and 3) how to be listen with critical awareness in both interpersonal and public speaking situations. However, just learning the concepts of listening is not enough; it is equally important to practice these skills. And remember that practice is not a rote process but must be adapted and used with sensitivity to the unique context of listening. In this spirit public listening in this module is broken down into listening in the classroom as well as the public spaces of society. Listening in the classroom imposes a unique format for practicing listening to speakers in a supportive environment. The classroom can also prepare us to listen critically in the public sphere of a democratic society. Finally, this module takes account of listening in mediated situations in contemporary society. Mediated situations are more important with the plethora of new media, but there is no substitute for face-to-face engagement where the listener can utilize all of his/her senses to follow and evaluate the communication.

Chapter Glossary

Active (Reflective) Listening: is the skill of listening closely and reflecting back the information to the speaker.

Appreciative listening: allows individuals to listen for entertainment or enjoyment, such as when we listen to poetry or music.

Attention: that mental state in which there is an intense voluntary direction and concentration of consciousness, as in attentive listening.

Comprehensive listening: is necessary for individuals to understand the message. This includes differentiating between vocal sounds in order to comprehend the emotional content of the message.

Constructive feedback: feedback that is descriptive and not judgmental.

Critical (Evaluative) listening: is used to evaluate a message before accepting or rejecting it.

Dialogic (Relational) listening: a type of active listening, takes into account the whole listening environment and seeks to enhance personal relationships.

Discriminative listening: allows individuals to separate fact, which is provable information, from opinion, which is more subjective and ambiguous.

Dogmatism: expressing strongly held opinions in a way that suggests they should be accepted without question (Encarta).

Egocentrism: is a self-centeredness, an interest in only what is relevant to our self. Ethnocentrism is akin to egocentrism, but rather than being limited to our own personal interests we limit ourselves to the interests of our ethnic or cultural group.

Empathy: a feeling, perhaps intuitive, in which one individual identifies with another, in other words.

Hearing: essentially a physiological process, involves three interconnected stages: reception of sound waves, perception of sound in the brain, and auditory association.

Information overload: the constant, 24/7, flow of information, which can overload our ability to process messages.

Listening: the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.

Mindfulness: a state in which we are neither judging nor thinking but rather wholly present in the moment; it is an important strategy that helps us to enhance our attentiveness powers and improve listening skills.

Open questions: are questions that do not require a yes or no answer

Paraphrasing: re-wording what the speaker has said and mirroring the message in your own words

Paralinguistics: nonverbal communication related to voice, the way you sound to others, that is, the volume, pitch and rate of your voice.

Therapeutic listening: allows the individual to listen without judging. The purpose of therapeutic listening is to help the speaker change or progress in some way.

Visual mapping: diagramming, as of sentences, and using branching to illustrate major and subordinate ideas--as in the main thought, modifiers and dependent and independent clauses of a sentence.

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