

Listening vs. Hearing

The average person spends 45-75% of their waking time listening rather than talking. Since we do listen more than we talk, it is important for our success as communicators to focus as much on the listening process as it does the verbal or nonverbal processes of communication. First, it is important to realize that listening and hearing are two different things.

Hearing is the physical process that your body goes through as sound hits our ear drums. It is a passive activity where we don't have to actively engage our brain to do that activity.

Listening, on the other hand, is an active process that requires effort on our part – we actually have to consciously think to listen!

Types of Listening

We don't always listen for the same purpose - we actually listen in several different ways:

Informational listening: We engage in this type of listening to gain and understand information. This is the type of listening we generally do in class when we are trying to process new information.

Critical listening: We engage in this type of listening when we are trying to form opinions, make judgments, or to evaluate people and ideas. This is the type of listening a professor does as she listens to a student speech or as she reads a student's persuasive essay.

Relational listening: We engage in this type of listening when we are trying to focus on supporting another person or maintaining a relationship. This is the type of listening we engage in with our closest friends and our relatives.

Listening for pleasure: We engage in this type of listening for entertainment or enjoyment. This is the type of listening we engage in as we listen to music or to a comedy group.

Listening to discriminate: We engage in this type of listening when we are discriminating between sounds. This is the type of listening a parent does when he hears his baby crying. The parent is discriminating between a "I am hurt" cry, a "I am hungry" cry, or a "I am alone is there someone out there?" cry.

The Listening Process

The listening process involves the following steps:

1. **Being mindful:** This is your conscious decision to focus on the here and now – to be engaged in the moment.
2. **Physically receive message:** This is the part where your ear drum responds to sound wave stimuli.
3. **Selecting and Organizing Material:** This is where your brain chooses what to focus on and what to ignore. This is also where you compare the sound with others you've heard before and you apply

cognitive schemata to the sounds to categorize them (remember that term from our discussion of perception?).

4. **Interpreting communication:** Interpretation of a verbal or nonverbal message involves more than physically hearing or seeing the message. We put together all we have selected and organized to make sense of the situation.

5. **Responding:** This is where we communicate that we are paying attention, show interest in the communication, and we share our views.

6. **Remembering:** This is where you remember or retain what you hear. It is important for us to realize that we remember less than 50% of what we hear and the longer the time goes by, we remember even less than the 50%!

Listening and Gender

Gender plays a huge role in listening and talking behaviors. Men tend to spend more time listening than women do while women use more words in a given day than men do. Men, however tend to communicate and listen to accomplish tasks (i.e. they are “work” oriented) while women tend to communicate and listen to build relationships (i.e. they are “emotion” oriented. Men tend to listen to the words only (i.e. the “literal” meaning) while women tend to listen for the hidden meanings in each message (i.e. they interpret and “read into” the message more).

Obstacles to Effective Listening

There are many things that we have to overcome in the listening process:

1. **Message overload:** When we think about the number of messages we hear in a given day, it is not surprising that we can't listen to them all. In fact, we are inundated by thousands of messages that we chose to ignore because there are just too many messages to pay attention to. Just like many of us screen our phone calls to avoid telemarketers, we also screen the sounds we hear in our daily lives.

2. **Message complexity:** The more complicated a message is, the more difficult it is for us to process and interpret. This is why we might tune out messages that are above our head or we may need to hear things two or three times if it's complex to interpret it correctly.

3. **Environmental distractions:** Our environment is filled with a cacophony of noises. Good listening means that we have to eliminate outside distractions so we can focus on important communication.

4. **Preoccupation:** This is when we are more worried about what is going on in our own lives or emotional state than on what is happening in the communication. Good listening means that we need to set aside our preoccupation to effectively listen.

5. **Prejudgments:** A prejudice is when we impose our preconceptions on another rather than listening to the actual message. Needless to say, prejudging another is a dangerous activity that will impede your communication. How can you listen to another's perspective if you've already prejudged them? Are you really listening to them?

6. **Lack of effort:** Listening takes effort and sometimes we don't have the time or energy to invest the effort into the communication. To be effective communicators means that we may need to postpone some conversations until we have the time to listen effectively.

7. **Not accommodating diverse listening styles:** Listening patterns are culturally dependent and a personal choice. This means that each person has a different set of personal rules for turn-taking in a conversation and listening. Cultural and personal adjustment is necessary in all aspects of communication, including listening.

6 Types of Nonlistening

While the following nonlistening behaviors might sound a bit rude, they are actually very common in conversation. As you read the description of each, think about the people you know who exhibit the behavior. By identifying a person with each of these nonlistening behaviors, it will be easier for you to keep each behavior straight in your mind.

1. **Pseudolistening:** This is when we pretend to listen to another person but don't really participate in the conversation. Generally, this is not meant as a deliberately rude behavior as most people who engage in pseudolistening do so because they don't want to hurt the other person's feelings so they will pretend to listen and will engage in listening-like behaviors including making utterance in response to the other person's communication.

2. **Monopolizing:** This is when we dominate the conversation by keeping all the attention focused on ourselves instead of using a turn taking approach in a conversation.

3. **Selective listening:** This is when we focus on only certain parts of the communication. Think about how many messages a day you screen out!

4. **Defensive listening:** This is when we deliberately listen for what we perceive to be personal attacks, criticism, or hostile undertones when no offense was intended by the other person. We listen on the defensive instead of actually hearing the message.

5. **Ambushing:** This is when we listen for the purpose of attacking the other person. We listen deliberately to gain ammunition for our next attack rather than for the message the other person might be saying.

6. **Literal listening:** This is when we listen only for the content but ignore the relationship level of the meaning.

Effective Listening Techniques

To become a more effective listener, practice the following tips:

1. **Be mindful:** Stay engaged to be an effective listener. Being mindful is a choice, so chose to participate in the communication!

2. **Control obstacles:** Eliminate obstacles in your communication – anything that is hindering or blocking your ability to listen should be controlled or eliminated.

3. **Ask questions:** Asking questions lets you clarify areas of uncertainty or confusion.

4. **Use aids to recall:** There are many ways to recall information as we engage in listening. We can repeat information to ourselves or out loud which helps us set the information in our brains and we can make rhymes to help us remember certain information – just like most of us do to study for an exam!

5. **Organize information:** The more we can categorize information into recognizable chunks, the easier it will be for us to comprehend it all.

6. **Suspend judgment:** Avoid making judgments as we communicate. Only supply a judgment if one is requested, otherwise try your hardest to avoid judging as you communicate.

7. **Understand the other's perspective:** Effective listening is really about understanding what the other person is saying, feeling, and meaning which means that we must step out of our own viewpoint so we can see things through the other person's eyes. Use paraphrasing as a method of repeating the other person's perspective out loud. This confirms the other person and shows how much you understand their perspective. Use minimal encouragers in your communication to express interest in the other person's perspective.

8. **Express support:** Even if we don't agree with the other person, we should at least support the other person.