

AFTER STUDYING THE MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER . . .

You should understand:

1. The most common misconceptions about listening.
2. The five components of the listening process.
3. The most common types of ineffective listening.
4. The challenges that make effective listening difficult.
5. The skills necessary to listen effectively in informational, critical, and empathic settings.

You should be able to:

1. Identify situations where you listen ineffectively and explain the reasons for your lack of effectiveness.
2. Identify the consequences of your ineffective listening.
3. Follow the guidelines for informational listening.
4. Analyze an argument or claim by evaluating the credibility of its proponent, the quality of evidence offered, and the soundness of its reasoning.
5. Apply appropriate response styles in an empathic listening context.





Listening

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Most people need to think about listening in a new way.

- There's a difference between hearing and listening.
- Listening isn't a natural ability, and it takes effort and practice to do well.
- It's probable that people will hear the same message in different ways.

Two approaches can help you become a better listener:

- Minimize faulty listening behaviors
- Understand some of the reasons you listen poorly

Most people use one of four personal listening styles

- Content-oriented
- People-oriented
- Action-oriented
- Time-oriented

There are three ways to listen and respond:

- For information
- To critically evaluate a speaker's ideas
- To help others with their problems

In a world where almost everyone acknowledges the importance of better communication, the need for good listening is obvious. On the most basic level, listening is just as important as speaking. After all, it's impossible for communication to occur without someone receiving a message. (Imagine how ridiculous it would be to speak to an empty room or talk into a disconnected telephone.)

If frequency is a measure of importance, then listening easily qualifies as the most prominent kind of communication. We spend more time in listening to others than in any other type of communication. One study revealed that of their total communicating time, college students spent an average of 14 percent writing, 16 percent speaking, 17 percent reading, and a whopping 53 percent listening.¹ On the job, listening is by far the most common form of communication. On average, employees of major corporations in North America spend about 60 percent of each working day listening to others.²

Besides being the most frequent form of communication, listening is arguably just as important as speaking. When a group of adults was asked to identify the most important on-the-job communication skills, listening ranked at the top of the list. A study examining the link between listening and career success revealed that better listeners rose to higher levels in their organizations.³ A survey of personnel managers identified listening as the most critical skill for working effectively in teams.⁴ In small groups, other members view people who listen well as leaders.⁵ Listening is just as important in personal relationships. In one survey, marital counselors identified "failing to take the other's perspective when listening" as one of the most frequent communication problems in the couples with whom they work.⁶ When another group of adults was asked which communication skills were most important in family and social settings, listening was ranked first.⁷ In committed relationships, listening to personal information in everyday conversations is considered an important ingredient of satisfaction.⁸ For this reason, some theorists have argued that effective listening is an essential ingredient in effective relational communication.⁹

Despite the importance of listening, experience shows that much of the listening we and others do is not at all effective. We misunderstand others and are misunderstood in return. We become bored and feign attention while our minds wander. We engage in a battle of interruptions where each person fights to speak without hearing the other's ideas.

Some of this poor listening is inevitable, perhaps even justified. But in other cases we can be better receivers by learning a few basic listening skills. This chapter will help you become a better listener by giving you some important information about the subject. We'll talk about some common misconceptions concerning listening and show you what really happens when listening takes place. We'll discuss some poor listening habits, explain why they occur, and suggest better alternatives.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LISTENING

In spite of its importance, listening is misunderstood by most people. Because these misunderstandings so greatly affect our communication, we need to take a look at four common misconceptions that many communicators hold.

Listening and Hearing Are Not the Same Thing

Hearing is the process in which sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. **Listening** occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original

They call me the Speaker, but . . . they really ought to call me the Listener.

Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

I'll defend to the death your right to say that, but I never said I'd listen to it!

Tom Galloway

sound and then gives them meaning. Barring illness, injury, or earplugs, hearing can't be stopped. Your ears will pick up sound waves and transmit them to your brain whether you want them to or not. Listening, however, isn't automatic. Many times we hear but do not listen. Sometimes we deliberately tune out unwanted signals: everything from a neighbor's power lawn mower or the roar of nearby traffic to a friend's boring remarks or a boss's unwanted criticism.

A closer look at listening—at least the successful variety—shows that it consists of several stages. After hearing, the next stage is **attending**—the act of paying attention to a signal. An individual's needs, wants, desires, and interests determine what is attended to, or selected, to use the term introduced in Chapter 2.

The next step in listening is **understanding**—the process of making sense of a message. Chapter 3 discussed many of the ingredients that combine to make understanding possible: a grasp of the syntax of the language being spoken, semantic decoding, and knowledge of the pragmatic rules that help you figure out a speaker's meaning from the context. In addition to these steps, understanding often depends on the ability to organize the information we hear into recognizable form. As early as 1948, Ralph Nichols related successful understanding to a large number of factors, most prominent among which were verbal ability, intelligence, and motivation.¹⁰

Responding to a message consists of giving observable feedback to the speaker. Offering feedback serves two important functions: It helps you clarify your understanding of a speaker's message, and it shows that you care about what that speaker is saying.

Listeners don't always respond visibly to a speaker—but research suggests that they should. One study of 195 critical incidents in banking and medical settings showed that a major difference between effective listening and ineffective listening was the kind of feedback offered.¹¹ Good listeners showed that they were attentive by nonverbal behaviors such as keeping eye contact and reacting with appropriate facial expressions. Their verbal behavior—answering questions and exchanging ideas, for example—also demonstrated their attention. It's easy to imagine how other responses would signal less effective listening. A slumped posture, bored expression, and yawning send a clear message that you are not tuned in to the speaker.

Adding responsiveness to our listening model demonstrates the fact, discussed in Chapter 1, that communication is transactional in nature. Listening isn't just a passive activity. As listeners we are active participants in a communication transaction. At the same time that we receive messages we also send them.

The final step in the listening process is **remembering**.¹² Research has revealed that people remember only about half of what they hear *immediately after* hearing it.¹³ This is true even if people work hard at listening. This situation would probably not be too bad if the half remembered right after were retained, but it isn't. Within two months half of the half is forgotten, bringing what we remember down to about 25 percent of the original message. This loss, however, doesn't take two months: People start forgetting immediately (within eight hours the 50 percent remembered drops to about 35 percent). Given the amount of information we process every day—from instructors, friends, the radio, TV, and



I can't help hearing, but I don't always listen.

George Burns

CULTURAL IDIOM

tune out: not listen

tuned in: focused, paying attention



UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

TELEVISION AND POOR LISTENING

Research published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* has reveals that preschoolers who watch more than an hour of television daily risk developing attention deficit problems later in life. The study examined the viewing habits and cognitive abilities of 1,345 children, ages 1 and 3. Parents recorded the children's TV viewing habits, and then rated their behavior at age 7 on a scale similar to one used to diagnose attention deficit disorders.

Children who watched one to two hours per day had a 10 percent to 20 percent increased risk of attention problems, compared to those who watched less than an hour of TV daily. The children who watched three to four hours daily had a 30 percent to 40 percent increased risk compared with

children who watched no TV. These results fit with earlier research showing that TV can shorten attention spans, and it supports the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations that youngsters under age two not watch television.

The researchers concluded that the content of programs probably isn't what causes thinking problems. Instead, they believe that the rapid-fire visual images common in children's TV programming may overstimulate and permanently "rewire" the developing brain.

Dimitri A. Christakis, Frederick J. Zimmerman, David L. DiGiuseppe, and Carolyn A. McCarty, "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children," *Pediatrics* 113 (2004): 708–713.

other sources—the **residual message** (what we remember) is a small fraction of what we hear.

Listening Is Not a Natural Process

Another common myth is that listening is like breathing: a natural activity that people do well. The truth is that listening is a skill much like speaking: Everybody does it, though few people do it well. One study illustrates this point: 144 managers in a study were asked to rate their listening skills. Astonishingly, not one of the managers described himself or herself as a "poor" or "very poor" listener, whereas 94 percent rated themselves as "good" or "very good."¹⁴ The favorable self-ratings contrasted sharply with the perceptions of the managers' subordinates, many of whom said their boss's listening skills were weak. As we have already discussed, some poor listening is inevitable. The good news is that listening can be improved through instruction and training.¹⁵ Despite this fact, the amount of time devoted to teaching listening is far less than that devoted to other types of communication. Table 4-1 reflects this upside-down arrangement.

TABLE 4-1 Comparison of Communication Activities

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Learned	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Used	Most	Next to most	Next to least	Least
Taught	Least	Next to least	Next to most	Most

Listening Requires Effort

Most people assume that listening is fundamentally a passive activity in which the receiver absorbs a speaker's ideas, rather the way a sponge absorbs water. As you will soon read, every kind of listening requires mental effort by the receiver. And experience shows that passive listening almost guarantees that the respondent will fail to grasp at least some of the speaker's ideas and misunderstand others.

All Listeners Do Not Receive the Same Message

When two or more people are listening to a speaker, we tend to assume that they all are hearing and understanding the same message. In fact, such uniform comprehension isn't the case. Recall the discussion of perception in Chapter 2, where we pointed out the many factors that cause each of us to perceive an event differently. Physiological factors, social roles, cultural background, personal interests, and needs all shape and distort the raw data we hear into uniquely different messages.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Despite the importance of good listening, people seem to get worse at the skill as they grow older.¹⁶ Teachers at various grade levels were asked to stop their lectures periodically and ask students what they were talking about. Ninety percent of first-grade children could repeat what the teacher had been saying, and 80 percent of the second-graders could do so; but when the experiment was repeated with teenagers, the results were much less impressive. Only 44 percent of junior high students and 28 percent of senior high students could repeat their teachers' remarks.

Research suggests that adults listen even more poorly—at least in some important relationships. One experiment found that people listened more attentively and courteously to strangers than to their spouses. When faced with decision-making tasks, couples interrupted one another more frequently and were generally less polite than they were to strangers.¹⁷

What kinds of poor listening habits plague communication? To find out, read on.

Faulty Listening Behaviors

Although we can't listen effectively all the time, most people possess one or more habits that keep them from understanding truly important messages.

PSEUDOLISTENING **Pseudolistening** is an imitation of the real thing. Pseudolisteners give the appearance of being attentive: They look you in the eye, nod and smile at the right times, and even may answer you occasionally. Behind that appearance of interest, however, something entirely different is going on, because pseudolisteners use a polite facade to mask thoughts that have nothing to do with what the speaker is saying.

SELECTIVE LISTENING **Selective listeners** respond only to the parts of a speaker's remarks that interest them, rejecting everything else. All of us are se-



Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf.

Heraclitus



Source: PEANUTS reprinted by permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

lective listeners from time to time as, for instance, when we screen out media commercials and music while keeping an ear cocked for a weather report or an announcement of time. In other cases, selective listening occurs in conversations with people who expect a thorough hearing but get their partner's attention only when the conversation turns to the partner's favorite topic—perhaps money, sex, a hobby, or some particular person. Unless and until you bring up one of these pet topics, you might as well talk to a tree.

DEFENSIVE LISTENING **Defensive listeners** take innocent comments as personal attacks. Teenagers who perceive parental questions about friends and activities as distrustful snooping are defensive listeners, as are insecure breadwinners who explode when their mates mention money and touchy parents who view any questioning by their children as a threat to their authority and parental wisdom. Many defensive listeners are suffering from shaky public images and avoid admitting this by projecting their insecurities onto others.

AMBUSHING **Ambushers** listen carefully, but only because they are collecting information to attack what you have to say. The cross-examining prosecution attorney is a good example of an ambusher. Using this kind of strategy will justifiably initiate defensiveness on the other's behalf.

INSULATED LISTENING **Insulated listeners** are almost the opposite of their selective-listening cousins. Instead of looking for something specific, these people avoid it. Whenever a topic arises they'd rather not deal with, insulated listeners simply fail to hear it or, rather, to acknowledge it. If you remind them about a problem—perhaps an unfinished job, poor grades, or the like—they'll nod or answer you and then promptly forget what you've just said.

CULTURAL IDIOM

keeping an ear cocked: listening alertly

pet: favorite

breadwinners: those who support their families with their earnings

at face value: literally

INSENSITIVE LISTENING **Insensitive listeners** are the final example of people who don't receive another person's messages clearly. People often don't express their thoughts or feelings openly but instead communicate them through subtle and unconscious choice of words or nonverbal clues or both. Insensitive listeners aren't able to look beyond the words and behavior to understand their hidden meanings. Instead, they take a speaker's remarks at face value.

STAGE HOGGING **Stage hogs** (sometimes called “conversational narcissists”) try to turn the topic of conversations to themselves instead of showing interest in the

speaker.¹⁸ Interruptions are a hallmark of stage hogging. Besides preventing the listener from learning potentially valuable information, stage hogging can damage the relationship between the interrupter and the speaker. For example, applicants who interrupt the questions of an employment interviewer are likely to be rated less favorably than job seekers who wait until the interviewer has finished speaking before they respond.¹⁹

When confronted with stage hogs, people respond in one of two ways. Sometimes the strategy is passive: talking less, tuning out the speaker, showing boredom nonverbally, and leaving the conversation. Other strategies are more active: trying to recapture the floor, hinting about the stage hog's dominance, or confronting the speaker about his or her narcissism. Reactions like these give stage hogs a taste of their own medicine, turning the conversation into a verbal tug-of-war.

Reasons For Poor Listening

What causes people to listen poorly? There are several reasons, some of which can be avoided and others that are sad but inescapable facts of life.

EFFORT Listening effectively is hard work. The physical changes that occur during careful listening show the effort it takes: Heart rate quickens, respiration increases, and body temperature rises.²⁰ Notice that these changes are similar to the body's reaction to physical effort. This is no coincidence, because listening carefully to a speaker can be just as taxing as more obvious efforts. You can manage the effort that's required to listen well if you prepare yourself for the task. If you know that passive listening won't be enough, you can invest the energy to understand others.

MESSAGE OVERLOAD The amount of speech most of us encounter every day makes careful listening to everything we hear impossible. As we've already seen, many of us spend as much as one-third of the time we're awake listening to verbal messages—from teachers, coworkers, friends, family, salespeople, and total strangers. This means we often spend five hours or more a day listening to people talk. If you add this to the amount of time we tune in radio and television, you can see that it's impossible for us to keep our attention totally focused for that amount of time. Therefore, we have to let our attention wander at times. If you can consciously decide which messages are worth your attention, you can devote the time it takes to understand them.

RAPID THOUGHT Listening carefully is also difficult for a physiological reason. Although we are capable of understanding speech at rates up to 600 words per minute, the average person speaks between 100 and 140 words per minute.²¹ Thus, we have a great deal of mental "spare time" to spend while someone is talking. And the temptation is to use this time in ways that don't relate to the speaker's ideas, such as thinking about personal interests, daydreaming, planning a rebuttal, and so on. The trick is to use this spare time to understand the speaker's ideas better rather than to let your attention wander. Try to rephrase the speaker's ideas in your own words. Ask yourself how the ideas might be useful to you. Consider other angles that the speaker might not have mentioned.

CULTURAL IDIOM

tuning out: not listening

a taste of their own medicine: retaliating by responding in a similar manner

tug-of-war: contest or struggle

Easy listening is a style of music, not communication.

Harvey Mackay

CULTURAL IDIOM**charade:** pretense

PSYCHOLOGICAL NOISE Another reason why we don't always listen carefully is that we're often wrapped up in personal concerns that are of more immediate importance to us than the messages others are sending. It's hard to pay attention to someone else when you're anticipating an upcoming test or thinking about the wonderful time you had last night with good friends. Yet, we still feel we have to "listen" politely to others, and so we continue with our charade. It usually takes a conscious effort to set aside your personal concerns if you expect to give others' messages the attention they deserve.

Figure 4-1 illustrates four ways in which preoccupied listeners lose focus when distracted by psychological noise. Everyone's mind wanders at one time or another, but excessive preoccupation is both a reason for and a sign of poor listening.

PHYSICAL NOISE The world in which we live often presents distractions that make it hard to pay attention to others. The sound of traffic, music, others' speech,

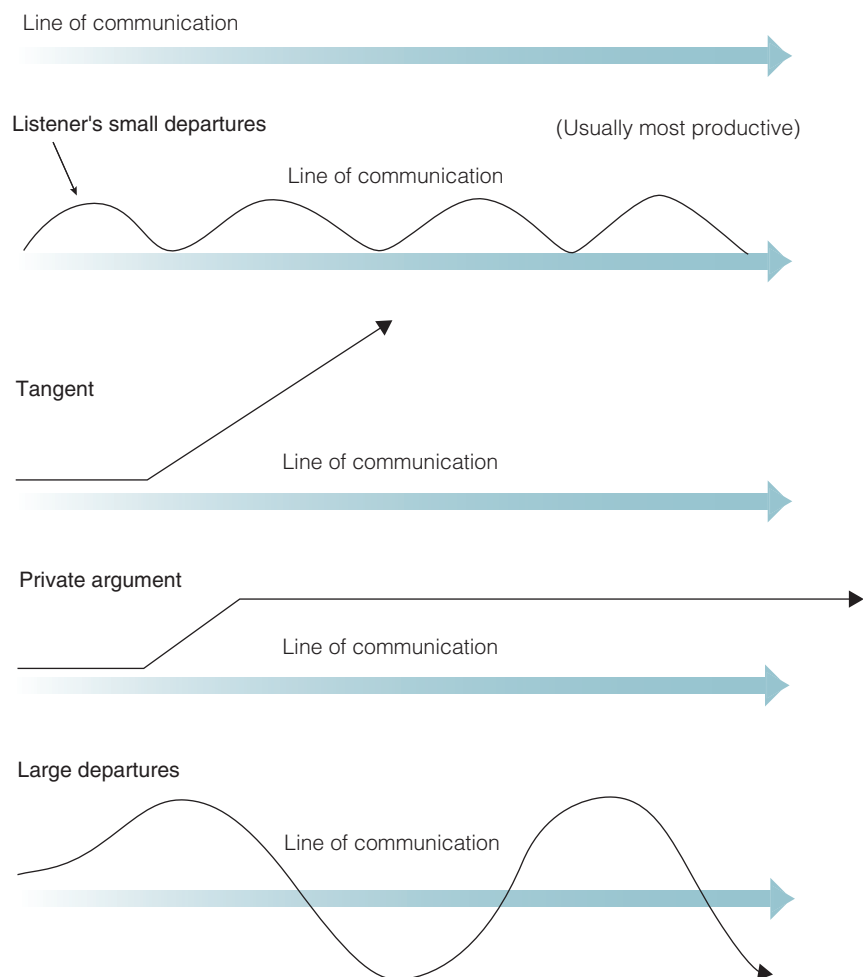


Figure 4-1 Four Thought Patterns. Source: A. D. Wolvin and C. G. Coakley, *Perspectives on Listening* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993), p. 115.



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

DEAFNESS LITE

So slight is the bereftness of my belated ear-fault
that “Deafness Lite” became the name that I call it.

In a simpler word: things heard are blurred
on the left as well (or as weakly) as right.
Neither half’s loss is a matter too drastic
both partly “cured” by batteries in plastic.

But if eyeing such signs of silence, Hearer,
or (harder to do) spying a less visible clue
try, by turning your speech slow and clearer
to reach those few who must communicate anew.

And so
that is why
as their advocate I
ask you unafflicted this:
Make me your talking’s target
and practice, practice, practice.
Address then the wise assistive eyes
of sisters and brothers with hindered ear
and so come to know, then to de-stranger-ize
those kindred other souls who less than I can hear.

Repeat. Rerword. For patience may reward your
self, not by some sense of the charity kind
but by sharing the very daringest adventure:
eyes meeting eyes and mind mating with mind.

Sal Parlato, Jr.

and the like interfere with our ability to hear well. Also, fatigue or other forms of discomfort can distract us from paying attention to a speaker’s remarks. Consider, for example, how the efficiency of your listening decreases when you are seated in a crowded, hot, stuffy room that is surrounded by traffic and other noises. In such circumstances even the best intentions aren’t enough to ensure clear understanding. You can often listen better by insulating yourself from outside distractions. This may involve removing the sources of noise: turning off the television, shutting the book you were reading, closing the window, and so on. In some cases, you and the speaker may need to find a more hospitable place to speak in order to make listening work.

HEARING PROBLEMS Sometimes a person’s listening ability suffers from a hearing problem—the most obvious sort of physiological noise, as defined in Chapter 1. After a hearing problem has been diagnosed, it’s often possible to treat it. The real tragedy occurs when a hearing loss goes undetected. In such cases, both the person with the defect and others can become frustrated and annoyed at the ineffective communication that results. If you suspect that you or someone you know suffers from a hearing loss, it’s wise to have a physician or audiologist perform an examination.

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS We often give others a mental brush-off because we assume their remarks don’t have much value. When one business consultant asked some of her clients why they interrupted colleagues, she received the following responses:

My idea is better than theirs.

If I don’t interrupt them, I’ll never get to say my idea.

CULTURAL IDIOM

give...brush-off: to dismiss or not pay attention to

CULTURAL IDIOM**rule out:** fail to consider**wit:** a clever conversationalist**grab the stage:** gain attention

I know what they are about to say.

They don't need to finish their thoughts since mine are better.

Nothing about their idea will improve with further development.

It is more important for me to get recognized than it is to hear their idea.

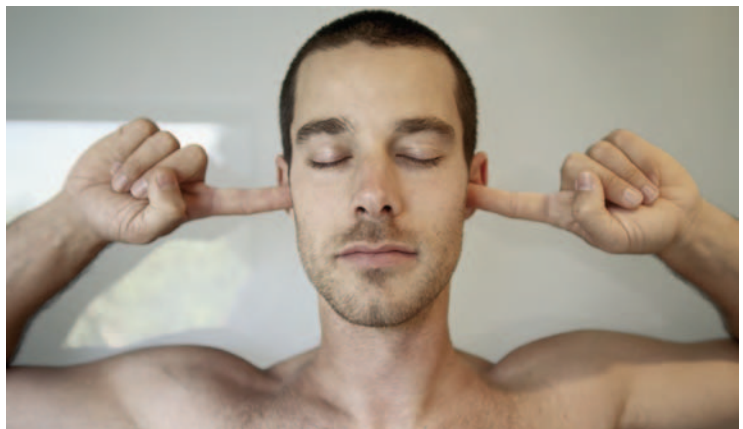
I'm more important than they are.²²

The egotism behind these comments is stunning. Dismissing others' ideas before considering them may be justified *sometimes*, but it's obviously a mistake to rule out so much of what others say . . . especially when you consider how you would feel if other people dismissed your comments without hearing you out.

TALKING HAS MORE APPARENT ADVANTAGES It often appears that we have more to gain by speaking than by listening. Whatever the goal—to have a prospective boss hire you, to convince others to vote for the candidate of your choice, or to describe the way you want your hair cut—the key to success seems to be the ability to speak well. Another apparent advantage of speaking is the chance it provides to gain the admiration, respect, or liking of others—or so you may think. Tell jokes, and everyone may think you're a real wit. Offer advice, and they might be grateful for your help. Tell them all you know, and they could be impressed by your wisdom.

Although speaking at the right time can lead people to appreciate you, talking too much can result in the kind of stage hogging described on pages 120–121. Not all interruptions are attempts at stage hogging. One study revealed a difference between male and female interrupters.²³ Men typically interrupted conversations far more than women. Their goal was usually to control the discussion. Women interrupted for very different reasons: to communicate agreement, to elaborate on the speaker's idea, or to participate in the topic of conversation. These sorts of responses are more likely to be welcomed as a contribution to the conversation and not as attempts to grab the stage.

If you find yourself hogging the conversation, try a simple experiment. Limit the frequency and length of your responses to a fraction of their usual amount. If you were speaking 50 percent of the time, cut back to 25 percent—or even less. If you interrupt the speaker every fifteen seconds, try to let him or her talk for





WHAT GOOD IS FREE SPEECH IF NO ONE LISTENS?

It is the law in this country, as in no other, that the individual has an extraordinary right to personal expression. The First Amendment to the Constitution protects the right to speak and to publish; these rights and the degree to which they are safeguarded are the distinguishing characteristics of American society.

For that we have only the courts to thank. Americans seem to be almost completely uninterested in any point of view other than their individual own. We are absolutely up to our necks in groups and blocs and religious and economic interests certain beyond all reason that they are correct and actively interested in imposing their rules and values and self-selected morals on the rest of us. They prattle about democracy, and use it when it suits them without the slightest regard or respect for what it means and costs and requires. These people are—please believe me—dangerous.

The right to speak is meaningless if no one will listen, and the right to publish is not worth having if no one will read. It is simply not enough that we reject censorship and will not countenance suppression; we have an affirmative responsibility to hear the argument before we disagree with it.

I think that you think that you agree with me, that you are fair and open-minded and good citizens. But if we put it to the

test—if I make up some speeches about gun control, abortion, gay rights, racial and ethnic characteristics, political terrorism and genocide—I believe that I can make you boo and jeer or at least walk out in protest.

We cannot operate that way. It's not difficult to listen to the philosophy you agree with or don't care about. It's the one that galls that must be heard. No idea is so repugnant that it must not be advocated. If we are not free to speak heresy and utter awful thoughts, we are not free at all. And if we are unwilling to hear that with which we most violently disagree, we are no longer citizens but have become part of the mob.

Nowhere is the willingness to listen more important than at a university, and nowhere is our failure more apparent than at the university whose faculty members or students think that it's legitimate to parade their own moral or political purity by shouting down the unpopular view of the day.

It will not be a week, and certainly not a month, before you will become aware that someone in your own circle of influence is saying something or thinking something very wrong. I think you have to do something about that. I think you have to help them be heard. I think you are required to listen.

Kurt Luedtke

closer to a minute. You are likely to discover that you're learning more—and probably gaining the appreciation of the other person.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES The way members of different cultures communicate can affect listening.²⁴ For instance, one study of young adults in various countries showed marked differences in listening preferences. Young Germans favored an action-oriented approach: They engaged speakers directly and were highly inquisitive. This style contrasts with the indirect approach of high-context Japanese listeners. Young Israelis were also less vocal than Germans and focused on careful analysis of others' statements. By contrast, young Americans emphasized the social dimension of a conversation and were more focused on how much time a conversation was taking.

MEDIA INFLUENCES A final challenge to serious listening is the influence of contemporary mass media, especially television and radio. A growing amount of programming consists of short segments: news items, commercials, music videos, and so on. (Think of *Sesame Street* and MTV.) In the same vein, news stories (for example, *USA Today* and the television news) consist of brief stories with a declining portion of text and a growing amount of graphical information. These trends discourage the kind of focused attention that is necessary for careful listening, especially to complicated ideas and feelings.

While the right to talk may be the beginning of freedom, the necessity of listening is what makes that right important.

Walter Lippmann

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

HOW CAREFULLY SHOULD YOU LISTEN?

What responsibility do communicators have to listen as carefully and thoughtfully as possible? Are there ever cases where we are justified in pseudolistening? Stage hogging? Defensive listening? Selective attention? Responding defensively? Ambushing? Insensitivity?

Is it dishonest to fake careful listening when you are not doing so, or do communicators have an obligation to confess that they are not listening? How would you feel if you knew others weren't listening to you?

PERSONAL LISTENING STYLES

Not everyone listens the same way. Communication researchers have identified four styles, each of which has both strengths and weaknesses.²⁵

Content-Oriented

As the label that characterizes them suggests, **content-oriented listeners** are most interested in the quality of messages they hear. They want to seek details and are good at analyzing an issue from several perspectives. They give weight to the messages of experts and other credible sources of information. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy ideas for their own sake and are willing to spend time exploring them in thorough exchanges of ideas.

A content-oriented approach is valuable when the goal is to evaluate the quality of ideas and when there is value in looking at issues from a wide range of perspectives. It is especially valuable when the topic is a complicated one. On the other hand, a content-oriented approach risks annoying people who don't have the same sort of analytical orientation. A content-oriented approach can take more time than others may be willing to give, and the challenging of ideas that comes with it can be perceived as overly critical or even hostile.

People-Oriented



People-oriented listeners are especially concerned with creating and maintaining positive relationships. They tune into others' moods, and they respond to speakers' feelings as well as their ideas. People-oriented listeners are typically less judgmental about what others have to say than are content-oriented types: They are more interested in understanding and supporting people than in evaluating them.²⁶

A people orientation has obvious strengths. But a strong concern for relationships has some less obvious drawbacks. It is easy to become overly involved with others' feelings. People-oriented listeners may lose their detachment and ability to assess the quality of information others are giving in an effort to be congenial and supportive. Less personally oriented communicators can view them as overly expressive and even intrusive.

CULTURAL IDIOM

give weight to: give priority to
tune into: pay attention to

Action-Oriented

Unlike people-oriented listeners, who focus on relationships, and content-oriented listeners, who are fascinated with ideas for their own sake, **action-oriented**

listeners are most concerned with the task at hand. Their main concern is to figure out what sort of response is required by a message. They want to get to the heart of the matter quickly, and so they appreciate clear, concise messages and often translate others' remarks into well-organized mental outlines.

Action-oriented listening is most appropriate when taking care of business is the primary concern: Such listeners keep a focus on the job at hand and encourage others to be organized and concise. But their no-nonsense approach isn't always appreciated by speakers who lack the skill or inclination to be clear and direct. Action-oriented listeners seem to minimize emotional issues and concerns, which may be an important part of business and personal transactions.

Time-Oriented

Time-oriented listeners are most concerned with efficiency. They view time as a scarce and valuable commodity. They grow impatient when they view others as wasting it. A time orientation can be an asset when deadlines and other pressures demand fast action. On the other hand, a time orientation can put off others when it seems to disregard their feelings. Also, an excessive focus on time can hamper the kind of thoughtful deliberation that some jobs require.

As you read the preceding descriptions, you may have found that you use more than one of the listening styles. If so, you aren't alone: 40 percent of the people who have used this instrument indicate at least two strong listening preferences.²⁷ Whichever styles you use, it is important to recognize that you can control the way you listen and to use the styles that best suit the situation at hand. When your relationship with the speaker needs attention, adopt a people-oriented approach. When clarity is the issue, be an action-oriented listener. If analysis is called for, put on your content-oriented persona. And when the clock is what matters most, become a model of time orientation. You can also boost your effectiveness by assessing the listening preferences of your conversational partners and adapting your style to them.

INFORMATIONAL LISTENING

Informational listening is the approach to take when you want to understand another person. When you are an informational listener, your goal is to make sure you are receiving the same thoughts the other person is trying to convey—not always an easy feat when you consider the forces listed on pages 121–125 that interfere with understanding.

The situations that call for informational listening are endless and varied: following an instructor's comments in class, listening to a friend's account of a night on the town, hearing a description of a new piece of equipment that you're thinking about buying, learning about your family history from a relative's tales,

CULTURAL IDIOM

put off: displease

Learn to listen. Opportunity could be knocking at your door very softly.

Frank Tyger

The Chinese characters that make up the verb “to listen” tell us something significant about this skill.



Calligraphy by Angie Au



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

COUNCIL: REVIVING THE ART OF LISTENING

Not too long ago, before our ears became accustomed to an increasing barrage of stimulation, many people knew how to listen attentively, while tracking an animal or hearing the approach of rain—or sitting in council with a group of their peers.

We know of no more effective way to invoke this state of listening than in what we have come to call the “council process.” The origin of this process can be traced to the League of the Iroquois (which had a powerful influence on the beginnings of our present governmental system) and the peoples of the plains and of the Southwestern pueblos. More recently, the traditional practice of council has emerged in contemporary form through the Native American Church. The roots of council also can be found in Homer’s *Iliad*, where a talking wand was used by a gathering of men to resolve the bitter dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon.

As we have practiced it, the basic form of council is simple. In order to empower each person to speak in turn, a “talking” object or “stick” is chosen to be passed around the circle—traditionally clockwise, in the “sun direction.” The talking stick can be as innocent as a flower just picked for the occasion or as venerable as a traditional hand-crafted artifact familiar to the group. Many councils that meet regularly use

the same object over a period of months or even years, so that it becomes a symbol of the group’s integrity and its capability for spirited communication.

We often set three simple rules for council: Speak honestly, be brief, and listen from the heart. One of the great challenges is to not be thinking about what you’re going to say until it’s your turn to speak. Preparing your contribution before you receive the talking stick obviously diminishes its spontaneity and its responsiveness to what others have said. A good practice is to wait until the talking stick is in your hands and then pause to see what springs to mind. Often we are surprised at the humor, tears, wisdom, or vision that comes forth.

We share the concern many people have today about the superficial “playing Indian”—that is, the appropriation of another culture’s traditions. We want to acknowledge how much we have learned from the teachings of Native American peoples and our own ancestors. Council for us is a spiritual practice growing out of all our history, and a practice in which we seek to express these roots in a contemporary context.

Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle
The Way of Council

swapping ideas in a discussion about religion or politics—the list goes on and on. You can become more effective as an informational listener by approaching others with a constructive attitude and by using some simple but effective skills.



Don’t Argue or Judge Prematurely

Ever since ancient Greece and later Rome, Western civilization has admired the ability to persuade others.²⁸ This tradition has led us to measure the success of much communication in terms of whether it changes the way others think and act. Recall, for example, what often happens when people encounter someone with differing opinions. Rather than try to understand one another, their conversation often turns into an argument or debate (sometimes friendly, and sometimes not) in which the participants try to change one another’s minds.

Persuasion is certainly one important goal of communication, but it isn’t the only one. Most people would agree with the principle that it’s essential to understand a speaker’s ideas before judging them. Despite this commonsense fact, all of us are guilty of forming snap judgments, evaluating others before hearing them out. This tendency is greatest when the speaker’s ideas conflict with our own.

We can communicate an idea around the world in seventy seconds but it sometimes takes years for an idea to get through ¼ inch of human skull.

Charles Kettering
inventor and General Motors executive

It's especially tempting to counterattack when others criticize you, even when those criticisms might contain valuable truths and when understanding them might lead to a change for the better. Even if there is no criticism or disagreement, we tend to evaluate others based on sketchy first impressions, forming snap judgments that aren't at all valid. Not all premature judgments are negative. It's also possible to jump to overly favorable conclusions about the quality of a speaker's remarks when we like that person or agree with the ideas being expressed. The lesson contained in these examples is clear: Listen first. Make sure you understand. Then evaluate or argue, if you choose.

CULTURAL IDIOM

write off: dismiss as worthless or unimportant

Separate the Message from the Speaker

The first recorded cases of blaming the messenger for an unpleasant message occurred in ancient Greece. When messengers would arrive reporting losses in battles, their generals were known to respond to the bad news by having the messengers put to death. This sort of irrational reaction is still common (though fortunately less violent) today. Consider a few situations in which there is a tendency to get angry with a communicator bearing unpleasant news: An instructor tries to explain why you did poorly on a major paper; a friend explains what you did to make a fool of yourself at the party last Saturday night; the boss points out how you could do your job better. At times like this, becoming irritated with the bearer of unpleasant information not only can cause you to miss important information, but also can harm your relationships.

There's a second way that confusing the message and the messenger can prevent you from understanding important ideas. At times you may mistakenly discount the value of a message because of the person who is presenting it. Even the most boring instructors, the most idiotic relatives, and the most demanding bosses occasionally make good points. If you write off everything a person says before you consider it, you may be cheating yourself out of some valuable information.

Be Opportunistic

Even if you listen with an open mind, sooner or later you will end up hearing information that is either so unimportant or so badly delivered that you're tempted to tune out. Although making a quick escape from such tedious situations is often the best thing to do, there are times when you can profit from paying close attention to apparently worthless communication. This is especially true when you're trapped in a situation where the only alternatives to attentiveness are pseudolistening or downright rudeness.

As an opportunistic listener you can find some value in even the worst situations, if you are willing to invest the effort. Consider how you might listen opportunistically when you find yourself locked in a boring conversation with someone whose ideas are worthless. Rather than torture yourself until escape is possible, you could keep yourself amused—and perhaps learn something useful—by listening carefully until you can answer the following (unspoken) questions:

“Is there anything useful in what this person is saying?”

“What led the speaker to come up with ideas like these?”

“What lessons can I learn from this person that will keep me from sounding the same way in other situations?”

There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject. There are only uninterested people.

G. K. Chesterton



Listening with a constructive attitude is important, but even the best intentions won't always help you understand others. The following skills can help you figure out messages that otherwise might be confusing, as well as help you see how those messages can make a difference in your life.

Look for Key Ideas

It's easy to lose patience with long-winded speakers who never seem to get to the point—or have a point, for that matter. Nonetheless, most people do have a central idea, or what we will call a “thesis” in Chapter 1. By using your ability to think more quickly than the speaker can talk, you may be able to extract the thesis from the surrounding mass of words you're hearing. If you can't figure out what the speaker is driving at, you can always ask in a tactful way by using the skills of questioning and paraphrasing, which we'll examine now.

Ask Questions

Questioning involves asking for additional information to clarify your idea of the sender's message. If you ask directions to a friend's house, typical questions might be “Is your place an apartment?” or “How long does it take to get there from here?” In more serious situations, questions could include “What's bothering you?” or “Why are you so angry?” or “Why is that so important?” Notice that one key element of these questions is that they request the speaker to elaborate on information already given.

Despite their apparent benefits, not all questions are equally helpful. Whereas **sincere questions** are aimed at understanding others, **counterfeit questions** are really disguised attempts to send a message, not receive one.

Counterfeit questions come in several varieties:

- *Questions that make statements.* “Are you serious?” “You did what?” Comments like these are certainly not genuine requests for information. Emphasizing certain words can also turn a question into a statement: “You lent money to Tony?” We also use questions to offer advice. The person who responds with, “Are you going to stand up to him and give him what he deserves?” clearly has stated an opinion about what should be done.
- *Questions that carry hidden agendas.* “Are you busy Friday night?” is a dangerous question to answer. If you say, “No,” thinking the person has something fun in mind, you won't like hearing, “Good, because I need some help moving my piano.”
- *Questions that seek “correct” answers.* Most of us have been victims of question-askers who want to hear only a particular response. “Which shoes do you think I should wear?” can be a sincere question—unless the asker has a predetermined preference. When this happens, the asker isn't interested in listening to contrary opinions, and “incorrect” responses get shot down. Some of these questions may venture into delicate territory. “Honey, do you think I look ugly?” can be a request for a “correct” answer.

CULTURAL IDIOM

long-winded: speaking for a long time

to stand up to: to confront courageously

shot down: rejected or defeated

■ *Questions that are based on unchecked assumptions.* “Why aren’t you listening to me?” assumes the other person isn’t paying attention. “What’s the matter?” assumes that something is wrong. As Chapter 2 explains, perception checking is a much better way of checking out assumptions: “When you kept looking over at the TV, I thought you weren’t listening to me, but maybe I was wrong. *Were you paying attention?*”

Unlike counterfeit questions, sincere questions are genuine requests for new information that clarifies a speaker’s thoughts or feelings. Although the value of sincere questioning might seem obvious, people don’t use this information-seeking approach enough. Communicators are often reluctant to show their ignorance by asking for explanation of what seems like it should be an obvious point. At times like this it’s a good idea to recall a quote attributed to Confucius: “He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask is a fool for life.”

Paraphrase

Questioning is often a valuable tool for increasing understanding. Sometimes, however, questions won’t help you understand a speaker’s ideas any more clearly. As the humorous drawing on this page shows, questions can even lead to greater misunderstandings. Now consider another type of feedback—one that would tell you whether you understood what had already been said before you asked additional questions. This sort of feedback, termed **paraphrasing**, involves restating in your own words the message you thought the speaker had just sent, without adding anything new.

(To a direction-giver) “You’re telling me to drive down to the traffic light by the high school and turn toward the mountains, is that it?”

(To the boss) “So you need me both this Saturday *and* next Saturday—right?”

(To a professor) “When you said, ‘Don’t worry about the low grade on the quiz,’ did you mean it won’t count against my grade?”

In other cases, a paraphrase will reflect your understanding of the speaker’s *feelings*:

“You said you understand, but you look confused. Are you?”

“You seem to be in a hurry. I get the idea you don’t want to talk now. Is that right?”

“You said ‘Forget it,’ but it sounds like you’re mad. Are you?”

Whether your paraphrasing reflects a speaker’s thoughts or feelings, and whether it focuses on a specific comment or a general theme, the key to success is to restate the other person’s comments in your own words as a way of cross-checking the information. If you simply repeat the speaker’s comments verbatim, you will

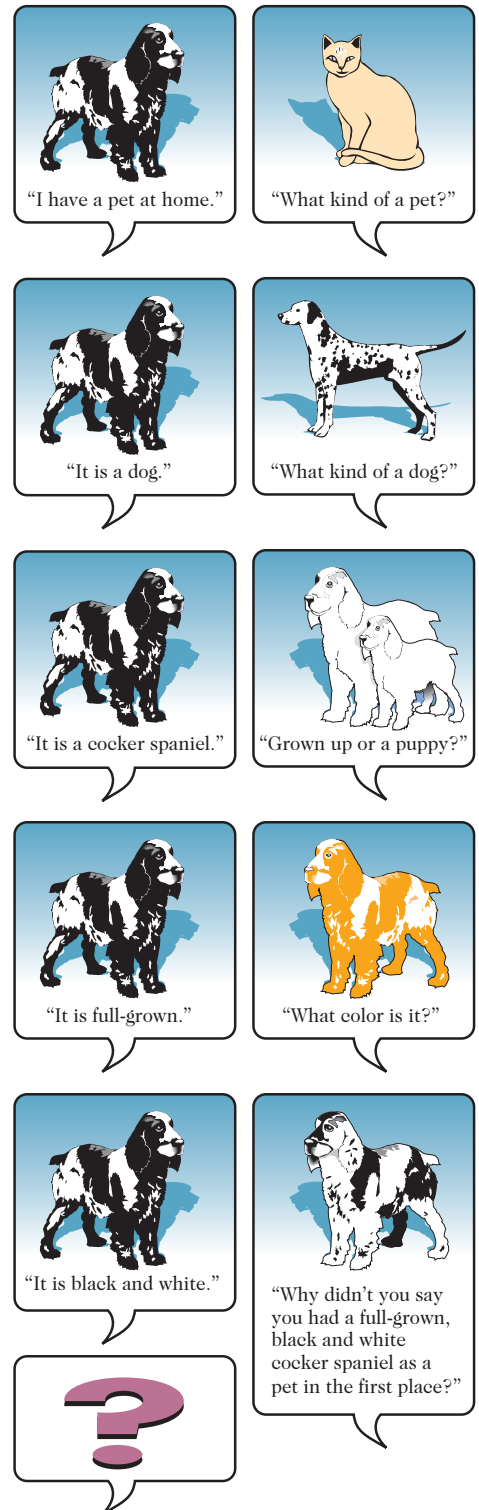


Figure 4-2 Asking Questions Doesn’t Guarantee Understanding

CULTURAL IDIOM

parroting: repeating without understanding

bleeding-heart liberals: persons motivated by sympathy rather than practicality

boosts the odds: increases the chances of success

sound foolish—and you still might well be misunderstanding what has been said. Notice the difference between simply parroting a statement and really paraphrasing:

Speaker: “I’d like to go, but I can’t afford it.”

Parroting: “You’d like to go, but you can’t afford it.”

Paraphrasing: “So if we could find a way to pay for you, you’d be willing to come. Is that right?”

Speaker: “Gawd, do you look awful!”

Parroting: “You think I look terrible.”

Paraphrasing: “You think I’ve put on too much weight?”

As these examples suggest, effective paraphrasing is a skill that takes time to develop. You can make your paraphrasing sound more natural by taking any of three approaches, depending on the situation:

1. Change the speaker’s wording.

Speaker: “Bilingual education is just another failed idea of bleeding-heart liberals.”

Paraphrase: “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re mad because you think bilingual ed sounds good, but it doesn’t work?” (*Reflects both the speaker’s feeling and the reason for it.*)

2. Offer an example of what you think the speaker is talking about. When the speaker makes an abstract statement, you may suggest a specific example or two to see if your understanding is accurate.

Speaker: “Lee is such a jerk. I can’t believe the way he acted last night.”

Paraphrase: “You think those jokes were pretty offensive, huh?” (*Reflects the listener’s guess about speaker’s reason for objecting to the behavior.*)

3. Reflect the underlying theme of the speaker’s remarks. When you want to summarize the theme that seems to have run through another person’s conversation, a complete or partial perception check is appropriate:

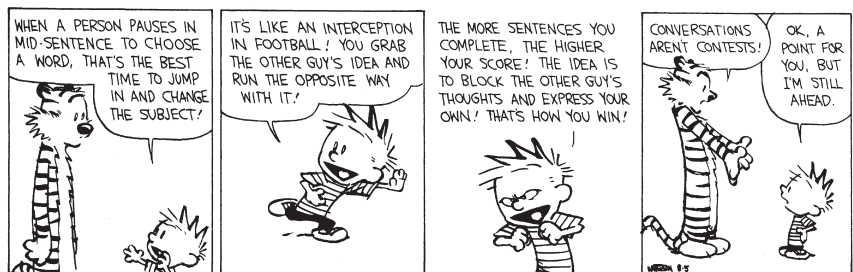
Paraphrase: “You keep reminding me to be careful. Sounds like you’re worried that something might happen to me. Am I right?” (*Reflects both the speaker’s thoughts and feelings and explicitly seeks clarification.*)



Learning to paraphrase isn’t easy, but it can be worth the effort, because it offers two very real advantages. First, it boosts the odds that you’ll accurately and

Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

HIGH SPEED LISTENING

As a student and as a lifelong learner, you can use the knowledge of “spare time” in listening to your advantage. People generally speak between 100 and 140 words per minute, but the brain can process and understand up to 600 words in the same amount of time. The more familiar you are with a topic, the faster you may be able to understand.

You can take advantage of your ability to process information quickly by using some simple technology. Many

variable-speed tape recorders are available in microcassette size. Some have pitch control to keep the speeded-up playback from sounding ridiculously high pitched.

You can use one of these devices for taping lectures and playing them back at a faster speed. If you listen to and tape a lecture as it is given, you may find that you can increase the playback speed and still understand and review the lecture.

fully understand what others are saying. We’ve already seen that using one-way listening or even asking questions may lead you to think that you’ve understood a speaker when, in fact, you haven’t. Paraphrasing, on the other hand, serves as a way of double-checking your interpretation for accuracy. Second, paraphrasing guides you toward sincerely trying to understand another person instead of using non-listening styles such as stage hogging, selective listening, and so on. If you force yourself to reflect the other person’s ideas in your own words, you’ll spend your mental energy trying to understand that speaker instead of using less constructive listening styles. For this reason, some communication experts suggest that the ratio of questioning and paraphrasing to confronting should be at least 5:1, if not more.²⁹

Take Notes

Understanding others is crucial, of course, but comprehending their ideas doesn’t guarantee that you will remember them. As you read earlier in this chapter, listeners usually forget almost two-thirds of what they hear.

Sometimes recall isn’t especially important. You don’t need to retain many details of the vacation adventures recounted by a neighbor or the childhood stories told by a relative. At other times, though, remembering a message—even minute details—is important. The lectures you hear in class are an obvious example. Likewise, it can be important to remember the details of plans that involve you: the time of a future appointment, the name of a phone caller whose message you took for someone else, or the orders given by your boss at work.

At times like these it’s smart to take notes instead of relying on your memory. Sometimes these notes may be simple and brief: a phone number jotted on a scrap of paper or a list of things to pick up at the market. In other cases—a lecture, for example—your notes need to be much longer. When detailed notes are necessary, a few simple points will help make them effective:

1. *Don’t wait too long before beginning to jot down ideas.* If you don’t realize that you need to take notes until five minutes into a conversation, you’re likely to forget much of what has been said and miss out on other information as you scramble to catch up.

CULTURAL IDIOM

scramble to catch up: to begin in a hurried fashion that which should have been started sooner.



FINDING COMMON GROUND THROUGH LISTENING

The reports from the front lines of the abortion wars are as dispiriting as ever. Hostilities have only escalated and opponents have now become enemies.

But in a vine-covered building behind a wooden fence in suburban Boston, a small group of family therapists is trying to establish a demilitarized zone. The Public Conversations Project they have created is on a leading edge of the nascent movement struggling to defuse the civil wars.

Their project grew out of a question that director Laura Chasin asked herself and her colleagues in 1990: “Do we as family therapists have skills that can be helpfully applied ‘out there’?”

Over the past year and a half, they invited groups of people to join a different sort of conversation. Some of their names were provided by Planned Parenthood and Massachusetts Citizens for Life; all identified themselves as pro-choice or pro-life.

Under the ground rules, people were not allowed to try to persuade each other. Instead, over three hours and under the guidance of a project member, they talked and listened. They explored stereotypes of each other, acknowledged ambivalence and watched what emerged from this process.

Some questions indeed led down hopeless, dead ends. When does life begin? Is the fetus a person? Who should decide? But of the fifty people who went through the process, only two were totally unable to find new ways of talking.

“The main thing that happened was the way these people perceived each other,” says Chasin. “They came in thinking,

oh my God, I’m going to be meeting with them. They went out thinking these people are compassionate, principled and share concerns that I have.”

Indeed at moments in the videotaped conversations, it is impossible to know the opponents without a label. Which side said, for example, “How do we get people who are in the business of making laws to start thinking about a world in which there would be no need for abortion?”

“These people were in such pitched battles,” said another project member, “they didn’t have a clue what they had in common.” But gradually they uncovered a shared concern about the well-being of children and mothers. Both sides agreed that using abortion as a form of birth control was wrong. They agreed as well about the importance of preventing unintended pregnancy and about the need for sex education.

Chasin and her colleagues harbor no grand illusions that this process will forge A Great Compromise on abortion—take your placards and go home.

But, once a pattern has been “busted,” once people are no longer defined as demons, they hope that the public, like the family, may be able to come up with some solutions. Indeed, there are hints of this success in other parts of this movement.

In Missouri, Wisconsin, Texas and California, pro-life and pro-choice people are meeting and talking—carefully.

Ellen Goodman

2. *Record only key ideas.* Don’t try to capture every word of long messages. If you can pin down the most important points, your notes will be easier to follow and much more useful.
3. *Develop a note-taking format.* The exact form you choose isn’t important. Some people use a formal outlining scheme with headings designated by Roman numerals, letters, and numbers, whereas others use simple lists. You might come up with useful symbols: boxes around key names and numbers or asterisks next to especially important information. After you develop a consistent format, your notes will not only help you remember information, but also help you whip others’ ideas into a shape that’s useful to you.

CULTURAL IDIOM

pin down: identify specifically

whip into shape: organize quickly

CRITICAL LISTENING

Whereas the goal of informational listening is to understand a speaker, the goal of **critical listening** (also called “evaluative listening”) is to judge the quality of a

message in order to decide whether to accept or reject it. At first the words *critical* and *evaluative* may put you off, because both words carry the negative connotations of carping and fault finding. But critical listeners needn't be hostile. Critical listening—at least in the sense we're discussing here—involves evaluating an idea to test its merit. In this sense, we could say that noncritical listeners are unquestioning, or even naive and gullible. Critical listening is appropriate when someone is trying to persuade you to buy a product, to act in a certain way, or to accept a belief—to cite a few examples. You will be most effective as a critical listener if you follow several guidelines:

Listen for Information Before Evaluating

The principle of listening for information before evaluating seems almost too obvious to mention, yet all of us are guilty of judging a speaker's ideas before we completely understand them. The tendency to make premature judgments is especially strong when the idea you are hearing conflicts with your own beliefs.

You can avoid the tendency to judge before understanding by following the simple rule of paraphrasing a speaker's ideas before responding to them. The effort required to translate the other person's ideas into your own words will keep you from arguing, and if your interpretation is mistaken, you'll know immediately.

Evaluate the Speaker's Credibility

The acceptability of an idea often depends on its source. If your longtime family friend, the self-made millionaire, invited you to invest your life savings in jojoba fruit futures, you might be grateful for the tip. If your deadbeat brother-in-law made the same offer, you would probably laugh off the suggestion.

Chapter 14 discusses credibility in detail, but two questions provide a quick guideline for deciding whether or not to accept a speaker as an authority:

1. *Is the speaker competent?* Does the speaker have the experience or the expertise to qualify as an authority on this subject? Note that someone who is knowledgeable in one area may not be as well qualified to comment in another area. For instance, your friend who can answer any question about computer programming might be a terrible advisor when the subject turns to romance.
2. *Is the speaker impartial?* Knowledge alone isn't enough to certify a speaker's ideas as acceptable. People who have a personal stake in the outcome of a topic are more likely to be biased. The unqualified praise a commission-earning salesperson gives a product may be more suspect than the mixed review you get from a user. This doesn't mean you should disregard any comments you hear from an involved party—only that you should consider the possibility of intentional or unintentional bias.

Examine the Speaker's Evidence and Reasoning

Speakers usually offer some kind of support to back up their statements. A car dealer who argues that domestic cars are just as reliable as imports might cite frequency-of-repair statistics from *Consumer Reports* or refer you to satisfied cus-



CULTURAL IDIOM

put you off: cause one displeasure

deadbeat: one who does not regularly pay bills

laugh off: dismiss with a laugh

tomers, for example; and a professor arguing that students don't work as hard as they used to might tell stories about then and now to back up the thesis.

Chapter 11 describes several types of supporting material that can be used to prove a point: definitions, descriptions, analogies, statistics, and so on. Whatever form the support takes, you can ask several questions to determine the quality of a speaker's evidence and reasoning:³⁰

1. *Is the evidence recent enough?* In many cases, ranging from trivial to important, old evidence is worthless. If the honors were earned several years ago, the cuisine from an "award-winning" restaurant may be barely edible today. The claim "Tony is a jerk" may have been true in the past, but people do change. Before you accept even the most credible evidence, be sure it isn't obsolete.
2. *Is enough evidence presented?* One or two pieces of support may be exceptions and not conclusive evidence. You might have heard this example of generalizing from limited evidence: "I never wear seat belts. I knew somebody who wasn't wearing them in an accident, and his life was saved because he was thrown clear from the car." Although not wearing seat belts might have been safer in this instance, on the average, experts agree when you consider all vehicle accidents, the chances of avoiding serious injury are much greater if you wear seat belts.
3. *Is the evidence from a reliable source?* Even a large amount of recent evidence may be worthless if the source is weak. Your cousin, the health-food fanatic, might not have the qualifications to talk about the poisonous effects of commercially farmed vegetables. On the other hand, the opinion of an impartial physician, nutritionist, or toxicologist would carry more weight.
4. *Can the evidence be interpreted in more than one way?* A piece of evidence that supports one claim might also support others. For example, you might hear someone argue that statistics showing women are underrepresented in the management of a company as part of a conspiracy to exclude them from positions of power. The same statistics, though, could have other explanations: Perhaps fewer women have been with the company long enough to be promoted, or perhaps this is a field that has not attracted large numbers of women. Alternative explanations don't necessarily mean that the one being argued is wrong, but they do raise questions that need to be answered before you accept an argument.

Besides taking a close look at the evidence a speaker presents, a critical listener will also look at how that evidence is put together to prove a point. Logicians have identified a number of logical fallacies—errors in reasoning that can lead to false conclusions. Logicians have identified over one hundred fallacies.³¹ Chapter 14 identifies some of the most common ones.

Examine Emotional Appeals

Sometimes emotion alone may be enough reason to persuade you. You might lend your friend \$20 just for old time's sake even though you don't expect to see the money again soon. In other cases, it's a mistake to let yourself be swayed by emotion when the logic of a point isn't sound. The excitement or fun in an ad or the lure of low monthly payments probably aren't good enough reasons to buy a product you can't afford. Again, the fallacies described in Chapter 14 will help you recognize flaws in emotional appeals.

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING

Think of three recent incidents when trying to understand the other person would have been the most appropriate listening style. Then think of three different situations when an evaluative approach would have been the most appropriate way to listen.

Based on your conclusions (and perhaps those of your classmates), develop a set of guidelines describing when it's best to listen purely for information, suspending judgment and attempting to uncritically understand another person's point of view. Next, describe the circumstances when it is more appropriate to listen evaluatively.

EMPATHIC LISTENING

We listen both informationally and critically out of self-interest. In **empathic listening**, however, the goal is to build a relationship or help the speaker solve a problem.³² Empathic listening is the approach to use when others seek help for personal dilemmas. Sometimes the problem is a big one: "I don't know whether to split up or stay with him." At other times the problem is more modest. A friend might be trying to decide what birthday gift to buy or whether to switch jobs. Empathic listening is also a good approach to take when you simply want to become better acquainted with others and to show them that their opinions and feelings matter to you.

The two goals of helping others and building a relationship aren't mutually exclusive. Empathic listening can accomplish both of them, because when listening helps another person, the relationship between speaker and listener improves.³³ For example, couples who communicate in ways that show they understand one another's feelings and ideas are more satisfied with their marriages than couples who express less understanding. The opposite is also true: In marriages where husbands do not give emotional responses to their wives, the stress level grows.

Whatever the relationship and topic, there are several styles by which you can respond empathically to another person's remarks.³⁴ Each of these styles has its advantages and disadvantages. As you read them, you can aim toward choosing the best style for the situation at hand.

CULTURAL IDIOM

to split up: to separate from one another in a relationship



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Advising

CULTURAL IDIOM

pin the blame on: claim the fault lies with

respecting the face needs: protecting one's dignity

face-saving: protecting one's dignity

When approached with another's problem, the most common tendency is an **advising** response: to help by offering a solution.³⁵ Although such a response is sometimes valuable, often it isn't as helpful as you might think.³⁶ In fact, researchers have discovered that advice is actually *unhelpful* at least as often as it is helpful.³⁷

There are several reasons why advice doesn't work especially well. First, it can be hard to tell when the other person wants to hear the helper's idea of a solution.³⁸ Sometimes the request is clear: "What do you think I should do?" At other times, though, it isn't clear whether certain statements are requests for direct advice. Ambiguous statements include requests for opinions ("What do you think of Jeff?"), soliciting information ("Would that be an example of sexual harassment?"), and announcement of a problem ("I'm really confused . . .").

Even when someone with a problem asks for advice, offering it may not be helpful. Your suggestion may not offer the best course to follow, in which case it can even be harmful. There's often a temptation to tell others how we would behave in their place, but it's important to realize that what's right for one person may not be right for another. A related consequence of advising is that it often allows others to avoid responsibility for their decisions. A partner who follows a suggestion of yours that doesn't work out can always pin the blame on you. Finally, often people simply don't want advice: They may not be ready to accept it, needing instead simply to talk out their thoughts and feelings.

Advice is most welcome under two conditions: when it has been requested and when the advisor seems concerned with respecting the face needs of the recipient.³⁹

Before offering advice, you need to be sure that four conditions are present:

1. *Be confident that the advice is correct.* You may be certain about some matters of fact, such as the proper way to solve a school problem or the cost of a piece of merchandise, but resist the temptation to act like an authority on matters you know little about. Furthermore, it is both unfair and risky to make suggestions when you aren't positive that they are the best choice. Realize that just because a course of action worked for you doesn't guarantee that it will work for everybody.
2. *Ask yourself whether the person seeking your advice seems willing to accept it.* In this way you can avoid the frustration of making good suggestions, only to find that the person with the problem had another solution in mind all the time.
3. *Be certain that the receiver won't blame you if the advice doesn't work out.* You may be offering the suggestions, but the choice and responsibility for accepting them are up to the recipient of your advice.
4. *Deliver your advice supportively, in a face-saving manner.* Advice that is perceived as being offered constructively, in the context of a solid relationship, is much better than critical comments offered in a way that signals a lack of respect for the receiver.⁴⁰

Judging

A **judging** response evaluates the sender's thoughts or behaviors in some way. The judgment may be favorable—"That's a good idea" or "You're on the right track

Many receive advice, few profit by it.

Publilius Syrus

now”—or unfavorable—“An attitude like that won’t get you anywhere.” But in either case it implies that the person doing the judging is in some way qualified to pass judgment on the speaker’s thoughts or behaviors.

Sometimes negative judgments are purely critical. How many times have you heard such responses as “Well, you asked for it!” or “I *told* you so!” or “You’re just feeling sorry for yourself”? Although comments like these can sometimes serve as a verbal slap that brings problem-holders to their senses, they usually make matters worse.

At other times negative judgments are less critical. These involve what we usually call *constructive criticism*, which is intended to help the problem-holder improve in the future. This is the sort of response given by friends about everything from the choice of clothing to jobs to friends. Another common setting for constructive criticism occurs in school, where instructors evaluate students’ work to help them master concepts and skills. But whether it’s justified or not, even constructive criticism runs the risk of arousing defensiveness because it may threaten the self-concept of the person at whom it is directed.

Judgments have the best chance of being received when two conditions exist:

1. *The person with the problem should have requested an evaluation from you.* Occasionally an unsolicited judgment may bring someone to his or her senses, but more often this sort of uninvited evaluation will trigger a defensive response.
2. *Your judgment is genuinely constructive and not designed as a put-down.* If you are tempted to use judgments as a weapon, don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are being helpful. Often the statement “I’m telling you this for your own good” simply isn’t true.

If you can remember to follow these two guidelines, your judgments will probably be less frequent and better received.

Analyzing

In an **analyzing** statement, the listener offers an interpretation of a speaker’s message. Analyses like these are probably familiar to you:

- “I think what’s really bothering you is . . .”
- “She’s doing it because . . .”
- “I don’t think you really meant that.”
- “Maybe the problem started when she . . .”

Interpretations are often effective ways to help people with problems to consider alternative meanings—meanings they would have never thought of without your help. Sometimes a clear analysis will make a confusing problem suddenly clear, either suggesting a solution or at least providing an understanding of what is occurring.

At other times, an analysis can create more problems than it solves. There are two problems with analyzing. First, your interpretation may not be correct, in which case the speaker may become even more confused by accepting it. Second, even if your interpretation is correct, telling it to the problem-holder might not be useful. There’s a chance that it will arouse defensiveness (because analysis implies superiority and evaluativeness), and even if it doesn’t, the person may not be able to understand your view of the problem without working it out personally.

CULTURAL IDIOM

bring someone to his or her senses: cause someone to think more rationally

a put-down: an insult, degrading remark



UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

SOCIAL SUPPORT ON THE INTERNET

Until recently most social support came from personal acquaintances: friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and so on. In the last fifteen years, though, there has been an explosion of “virtual communities” in which strangers meet online to share interests and concerns, and to gain support from one another on virtually every problem. The most popular support topics include medical conditions, eating disorders, sexual orientation, divorce, shyness, addictions, and loneliness.

In some aspects, online help is similar to the face-to-face variety. The goals are to gain information, emotional support, and a sense of being valued and cared for. In other ways, online support differs from the kind people seek in person. The most obvious difference is that most members of online communities are strangers who usually have not met in person, and may not even know each other’s real names.

Also, online groups often focus specifically on a single issue, while traditional relationships cover a wide range of topics. Another difference involves the rate and amount of self-disclosure: In traditional relationships, people usually reveal personal information slowly and carefully; but the anonymity of online support groups, they typically open up almost immediately.

It’s unlikely that online support groups will ever replace face-to-face relationships; but for hundreds of thousands of people, they provide another valuable tool for getting the help they often desperately need.

For a summary of research on online support groups, see Joseph B. Walther and Shawn Boyd, “Attraction to Computer-Mediated Social Support,” in C. A. Lin and D. Atkin, eds., *Communication Technology and Society: Audience Adoption and Uses* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002).

How can you know when it’s helpful to offer an analysis? There are several guidelines to follow:

1. *Offer your interpretation in a tentative way rather than as absolute fact.* There’s a big difference between saying, “Maybe the reason is . . .” or “The way it looks to me . . .” and insisting, “This is the truth.”
2. *Your analysis ought to have a reasonable chance of being correct.* An inaccurate interpretation—especially one that sounds plausible—can leave a person more confused than before.
3. *You ought to be sure that the other person will be receptive to your analysis.* Even if you’re completely accurate, your thoughts won’t help if the problem-holder isn’t ready to consider them.
4. *Be sure that your motive for offering an analysis is truly to help the other person.* It can be tempting to offer an analysis to show how brilliant you are or even to make the other person feel bad for not having thought of the right answer in the first place. Needless to say, an analysis offered under such conditions isn’t helpful.

Questioning

A few pages ago we talked about questioning as one way to understand others better. A **questioning** response can also be a way to help others think about their problems and understand them more clearly.⁴¹ For example, questioning can help a problem-holder define vague ideas more precisely. You might respond to a friend with a line of questioning: “You said Greg has been acting ‘differently’ toward you lately. What has he been doing?” Another example of a question that helps clarify is as follows: “You told your roommates that you wanted them to be more helpful in keeping the place clean. What would you like them to do?”



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

GENDER AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Researchers have found some important ways that men and women respond differently to others' problems. As a group, women are more likely than men to give supportive responses when presented with another person's problem. They are also more skillful at composing supportive messages. By contrast, men tend to respond to others' problems by offering advice, or by diverting the topic. In a study of helping styles in sororities and fraternities, researchers found that sorority women frequently respond with emotional support when asked to help; also, they rated their sisters as being better at listening nonjudgmentally, and on comforting and showing concern for them. Fraternity men, on the other hand, fit the stereotypical pattern of offering help by challenging their brothers to evaluate their attitudes and values.

These differences are real, but they aren't as dramatic as they might seem. For example, men are as likely as women to

respond supportively when they perceive that the other person is feeling a high degree of emotional stress. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to respond supportively even when others are only moderately stressed.

A number of factors interact with gender to shape how people provide social support including cultural background, personal goals, expressive style, and cognitive complexity. Based on these findings, it's important to respond in a way that fits with your personal style and is likely to be appreciated by the other person.

For a comprehensive discussion of sex similarities and differences in social support, see the Winter 2002 issue of *Communication Reports*, which contains several research studies on this subject. For a summary of findings, see B. R. Burleson's review in this issue: "Psychological Mediators of Sex Differences in Emotional Support: A Reflection on the Mosaic," *Communication Reports* 15 (Winter 2002): 71–79.

Questions can also encourage a problem-holder to examine a situation in more detail by talking either about what happened or about personal feelings, for example, "How did you feel when they turned you down? What did you do then?" This type of questioning is particularly helpful when you are dealing with someone who is quiet or is unwilling under the circumstances to talk about the problem very much.

Although questions have the potential to be helpful, they also run the risk of confusing or distracting the person with the problem. The best questioning follows these principles:

1. *Don't ask questions just to satisfy your own curiosity.* You might become so interested in the other person's story that you will want to hear more. "What did he say then?" you might be tempted to ask. "What happened next?" Responding to questions like these might confuse the person with the problem, or even leave him or her more agitated than before.
2. *Be sure your questions won't confuse or distract the person you're trying to help.* For instance, asking someone, "When did the problem begin?" might provide some clue about how to solve it—but it could also lead to a long digression that would only confuse matters. As with advice, it's important to be sure you're on the right track before asking questions.
3. *Don't use questions to disguise your suggestions or criticism.* We've all been questioned by parents, teachers, or other figures who seemed to be trying to trap us or indirectly to guide us. In this way, questioning becomes a strategy that can imply that the questioner already has some idea of what direction the discussion should take but isn't willing to tell you directly.

It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy, but it is easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the mourner ("don't take it so hard," "try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people") is wrong. Anything which tries to minimize the mourner's pain ("it's probably for the best," "it could be a lot worse," "she's better off now") is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the mourner to disguise or reject his feelings ("we have no right to question God," "God must love you to have selected you for this burden") is wrong as well.

Harold S. Kushner
When Bad Things Happen to Good People

CULTURAL IDIOM

turned you down: rejected your request or offer

Supporting

A **supporting** response can take several forms:

Agreement	“You’re right—the landlord is being unfair.” “Yeah, that class was tough for me, too.”
Offers to help	“I’m here if you need me.” “Let me try to explain it to him.”
Praise	“I don’t care what the boss said: I think you did a great job!” “You’re a terrific person! If she doesn’t recognize it, that’s her problem.”
Reassurance	“The worst part is over. It will probably get easier from here.” “I know you’ll do a great job.”
Diversion	“Let’s catch a movie and get your mind off this.” “That reminds me of the time we . . .”
Acknowledgment	“I can see that really hurts.” “I know how important that was to you.” “It’s no fun to feel unappreciated.”



There’s no question about the value of receiving support when faced with personal problems. “Comforting ability” and social support have been shown to be among the most important communication skills a friend—or a teacher or a parent—can have.⁴² In other instances, this kind of comment isn’t helpful at all; in fact, it can even make things worse. Telling a person who is obviously upset that everything is all right, or joking about a serious matter, can trivialize the problem. People might see your comments as a put-down, leaving them feeling worse than before.

As with the other styles we’ll discuss, supporting can be helpful, but only in certain circumstances.⁴³ For the occasions when supporting is an appropriate response, follow these guidelines:

1. *Make sure your expression of support is sincere.* Phony agreement or encouragement is probably worse than no support at all, because it adds the insult of your dishonesty to whatever pain the other person is already feeling.
2. *Be sure the other person can accept your support.* Sometimes we become so upset that we aren’t ready or able to hear anything positive.

Even if your advice, judgments, and analysis are correct and your questions are sincere, and even if your support comes from the best motives, these responses often fail to help. One recent survey demonstrates how poorly such traditional responses work.⁴⁴ Mourners who had recently suf-

ferred from the death of a loved one reported that 80 percent of the statements made to them were unhelpful. Nearly half of the “helpful” statements were advice: “You’ve got to get out more.” “Don’t question God’s will.” Despite their frequency, these responses were helpful only 3 percent of the time. The next most frequent response was reassurance, such as “She’s out of pain now.” Like advice, this kind of support was helpful only 3 percent of the time. Far more helpful were expressions that acknowledged the mourner’s feelings.

One American Red Cross grief counselor explained to survivors of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States how simply being present can be more helpful than trying to reassure grief-stricken family members who had lost loved ones in the tragedy:

Listen. Don’t say anything. Saying “it’ll be okay,” or “I know how you feel” can backfire. Right now that’s not what a victim wants to hear. They want to know people are there and care about them. Be there, be present, listen. The clergy refer to it as a “ministry of presence.” You don’t need to do anything, just be there or have them know you’re available.⁴⁵

CULTURAL IDIOM

wipe out: deplete

Prompting

Advising, judging, analyzing, questioning, and supporting are all active approaches to helping that call for a great deal of input from the respondent. Another approach to problem solving is more passive. **Prompting** involves using silences and brief statements of encouragement to draw others out, and in so doing to help them solve their own problems. Consider this example:

Pablo: Julie’s dad is selling a complete computer system for only \$1,200, but if I want it I have to buy it now. He’s got another interested buyer. It’s a great deal. But buying it would wipe out my savings. At the rate I spend money, it would take me a year to save up this much again.

Tim: Uh huh.

Pablo: I wouldn’t be able to take that ski trip over winter break . . . but I sure could save time with my schoolwork . . . and do a better job, too.

Tim: That’s for sure.

Pablo: Do you think I should buy it?

Tim: I don’t know. What do *you* think?

Pablo: I just can’t decide.

Tim: (*silence*)

Pablo: I’m going to do it. I’ll never get a deal like this again.

Prompting works especially well when you can’t help others make a decision. At times like this your presence can act like a catalyst to help others find their own answers. Prompting will work best when it’s done sincerely. Your nonverbal behaviors—eye contact, posture, facial expression, tone of voice—have to show that you are concerned with the other person’s problem. Mechanical prompting is likely to irritate instead of help.

Paraphrasing

A few pages ago you read about the value of paraphrasing to understand others. The same skill can be used as a helping tool. When you use this approach, be sure

CULTURAL IDIOM

coming on to: making a sexual advance to

a male chauvinist pig: a male who believes that men are superior to women

where I stand with: how I am perceived by

to reflect both the *thoughts* and the *feelings* you hear being expressed. This conversation between two friends shows how reflecting can offer support and help a person find the answer to her own problem:

Jill: I've had the strangest feeling about my boss lately.

Mark: What's that? (*A simple question invites Jill to go on.*)

Jill: I'm starting to think maybe he has this thing about women—or maybe it's just about me.

Mark: You mean he's coming on to you? (*Mark paraphrases what he thinks Jill has said.*)

Jill: Oh no, not at all! But it seems like he doesn't take women—or at least me—seriously. (*Jill corrects Mark's misunderstanding and explains herself.*)

Mark: What do you mean? (*Mark asks another simple question to get more information.*)

Jill: Well, whenever we're in a meeting or just talking around the office and he asks for ideas, he always seems to pick men. He gives orders to women—men, too—but he never asks the women to say what they think.

Mark: So you think maybe he doesn't take women seriously, is that it? (*Mark paraphrases Jill's last statement.*)

Jill: Yeah. Well, he sure doesn't seem interested in their ideas. But that doesn't mean he's a total woman-hater or a male chauvinist pig. I know he counts on some women in the office. Our accountant Teresa has been there forever, and he's always saying he couldn't live without her. And when Brenda got the new computer system up and running last month, I know he appreciated that. He gave her a day off and told everybody how she saved our lives.

Mark: Now you sound confused. (*Reflects her apparent feeling.*)

Jill: I am confused. I don't think it's just my imagination. I mean I'm a good producer, but he has never—not once—asked me for my ideas about how to improve sales or anything. And I can't remember a time when he's asked any other women. But maybe I'm overreacting.

Mark: You're not positive whether you're right, but I can tell that this has you concerned. (*Mark paraphrases both Jill's central theme and her feeling.*)

Jill: Yes. But I don't know what to do about it.

Mark: Maybe you should . . . (*Starts to offer advice but catches himself and decides to ask a sincere question instead.*) So what are your choices?

Jill: Well, I could just ask him if he's aware that he never asks women's opinions. But that might sound too aggressive and angry.

Mark: And you're not angry? (*Tries to clarify how Jill is feeling.*)

Jill: Not really. I don't know whether I should be angry because he's not taking ideas seriously, or whether he just doesn't take my ideas seriously, or whether it's nothing at all.

Mark: So you're mostly confused. (*Reflects Jill's apparent feeling again.*)

Jill: Yes! I don't know where I stand with my boss, and not being sure is starting to get to me. I wish I knew what he thinks of me. Maybe I could just tell him I'm confused about what is going on here and ask him to clear it up. But what if it's nothing? Then I'll look insecure.

Mark: (*Mark thinks Jill should confront her boss, but he isn't positive that this is the best approach, so he paraphrases what Jill seems to be saying.*) And that would make you look bad.

The reality of the other person is not in what he reveals to you, but in what he cannot reveal to you. Therefore, if you would understand him, listen not to what he says but rather to what he does not say.

Kahlil Gibran

Jill: I'm afraid maybe it would. I wonder if I could talk it over with anybody else in the office and get their ideas . . .

Mark: . . . see what they think . . .

Jill: Yeah. Maybe I could ask Brenda. She's easy to talk to, and I do respect her judgment. Maybe she could give me some ideas about how to handle this.

Mark: Sounds like you're comfortable with talking to Brenda first.

Jill: (*Warming to the idea.*) Yes! Then if it's nothing, I can calm down. But if I do need to talk to the boss, I'll know I'm doing the right thing.

Mark: Great. Let me know how it goes.

Reflecting a speaker's ideas and feelings in this way can be surprisingly helpful.⁴⁶ First, paraphrasing helps the problem-holder to sort out the problem. In the dialogue you just read, Mark's paraphrasing helped Jill pin down the real source of her concern: what her boss thinks of her, not whether he doesn't take women seriously. The clarity that comes from this sort of perspective can make it possible to find solutions that weren't apparent before. Paraphrasing is also helpful because it helps the problem-holder to unload more of the concerns he or she has been carrying around, often leading to the relief that comes from catharsis. Finally, listeners who reflect the speaker's thoughts and feelings (instead of judging or analyzing, for example) show their involvement and concern.

Paraphrasing can be helpful, but it is no panacea. A study by noted researcher John Gottman revealed that "active listening" (a term sometimes used to describe paraphrasing) by itself was not a trait that distinguished happily married couples from troubled ones.⁴⁷ Because empathy is the ingredient that makes paraphrasing thoughts and feelings helpful, it is a mistake to think of reflective listening as a technique that you can use mechanically. Carl Rogers, the psychologist generally considered the foremost advocate of active listening, made the case against mechanical paraphrasing strongly: "I am *not* trying to 'reflect feelings.' I am trying to determine whether my understanding of the client's inner world is correct—whether I am seeing it as he or she is experiencing it at this moment."⁴⁸ In other words, reflecting is not an end in itself; rather, it is one way to help others by understanding them better.

There are several factors to consider before you decide to paraphrase:

1. *Is the problem complex enough?* Sometimes people are simply looking for information and not trying to work out their feelings. At times like this, paraphrasing would be out of place. If someone asks you for the time of day, you'd do better simply to give her the information than to respond by saying, "You want to know what time it is." If you're fixing dinner, and someone wants to know when it will be ready, it would be exasperating to reply "You're interested in knowing when we'll be eating."
2. *Do you have the necessary time and concern?* The kind of paraphrasing we've been discussing here takes a good deal of time. Therefore, if you're in a hurry to do something besides listen, it's wise to avoid starting a conversation you won't be able to finish. Even more important than time is concern. It's not necessarily wrong to be too preoccupied to help or even to be unwilling to exert the considerable effort that active listening requires. You can't help everyone with every problem. It's far better to state honestly that you're unable or unwilling to help than to pretend to care when you really don't.
3. *Are you genuinely interested in helping the other person?* Sometimes as you listen to others, it's easy to relate their thoughts to your own life or to seek



more information just to satisfy your own curiosity. Remember that paraphrasing is a form of helping someone else. The general obligation to reciprocate the other person's self-disclosure with information of your own isn't necessary when the goal is to solve a problem. Research shows that speakers who reveal highly intimate personal information don't expect, or even appreciate, the same kind of disclosure from a conversational partner.⁴⁹ Rather, the most competent and socially attractive response is one that sticks to the same topic but is lower in intimacy. In other words, when we are opening up to others, we don't appreciate their pulling a conversational take-away such as "You're worried? So am I! Let me tell you about how I feel . . ."

4. *Can you withhold judgment?* You've already seen that paraphrasing allows other people to find their own answers. You should use this style only if you can comfortably paraphrase without injecting your own judgments. It's sometimes tempting to rephrase others' comments in a way that leads them toward the solution you think is best without ever clearly stating your intentions. As you will read in Chapter 7, this kind of strategy is likely to backfire by causing defensiveness if it's discovered. If you think the situation meets the criteria for advice described earlier in this chapter, you should offer your suggestions openly.
5. *Is your paraphrasing in proportion to other responses?* Although active listening can be a very helpful way of responding to others' problems, it can become artificial and annoying when it's overused. This is especially true if you suddenly begin to use it as a major response. Even if such responses are potentially helpful, this sudden switch in your behavior will be so out of character that others might find it distracting. A far better way to use paraphrasing is gradually to introduce it into your repertoire of helpfulness, so that you can become comfortable with it without appearing too awkward. Another way to become more comfortable with this style is to start using it on real but relatively minor problems, so that you'll be more adept at knowing how and when to use it when a big crisis does occur.

When and How to Help?

Before committing yourself to helping another person—even someone in obvious distress—make sure your help is welcome. There are many cases in which others prefer to keep their concerns to themselves. In these cases your efforts to get involved may not be useful and can even be harmful. In one survey, some people reported occasions when social support wasn't necessary, because they felt capable of handling the problem by themselves.⁵⁰ Many regarded uninvited help as an intrusion, and some said it left them feeling more nervous than before. The majority of respondents expressed a preference for being in control of whether their distressing situation should be discussed with even the most helpful friend.

When help is welcome, there is no single best way to provide it. Research shows that *all* styles can help others accept their situation, feel better, and have a sense of control over their problems.⁵¹ But there is enormous variability in which style will work with a given person.⁵² This fact explains why communicators who are able to use a wide variety of helping styles are usually more effective than those who rely on just one or two styles.⁵³

You can boost the odds of choosing the best helping style in each situation by considering three factors. First, think about the *situation* and match your response to the nature of the problem. Sometimes people need your advice. At other times your encouragement and support will be most helpful, and at still other times your analysis or judgment may be truly useful. And, as you have seen, there are times when your probes and paraphrasing can help others find their own answer.

Second, besides considering the situation, you should also think about the *other person* when deciding which style to use. Some people are able to consider advice thoughtfully, whereas others use suggestions to avoid making their own decisions. Many communicators are extremely defensive and aren't capable of receiving analysis or judgments without lashing out. Still others aren't equipped to think through problems clearly enough to profit from paraphrasing and probing. Sophisticated helpers choose a style that fits the person.

Third, think about *yourself* when deciding how to respond. Most of us reflexively use one or two helping styles. You may be best at listening quietly, offering a prompt from time to time. Or perhaps you are especially insightful and can offer a truly useful analysis of the problem. Of course, it's also possible to rely on a response style that is *unhelpful*. You may be overly judgmental or too eager to advise, even when your suggestions aren't invited or productive. As you think about how to respond to another's problems, consider both your strengths and weaknesses.

SUMMARY

Even the best message is useless if it goes unreceived or if it is misunderstood. For this reason, listening—the process of giving meaning to an oral message—is a vitally important part of the communication process. We began our look at the subject by identifying and refuting several myths about listening. Our conclusion here was that effective listening is a skill that needs to be developed in order for us to be truly effective in understanding others.

We next took a close look at five steps in the process of listening: hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering. We described some of the challenges that make effective listening so difficult. We described seven faulty listening behaviors and ten more reasons why people often listen poorly. You can become a better listener by recognizing which of these faulty behaviors and reasons characterize your communication.

This chapter also discussed several personal listening styles: content-oriented, people-oriented, action-oriented, and time-oriented. The chapter pointed out

that most people favor one of these styles, and that problems arise when different types of listeners interact. All of these styles have both advantages and drawbacks, and effective listeners will use each one when it is most appropriate for the circumstances.

The chapter continued by examining three types of listening. Informational listening is the proper approach to take when the goal is to understand another person's ideas. Information can be best gained with an active approach to listening. This active approach can involve either questioning or paraphrasing—restating the speaker's message in your own words.

Critical listening is appropriate when the goal is to judge the quality of an idea. A critical analysis will be most successful when the listener ensures correct understanding of a message before passing judgment, when the speaker's credibility is taken into account, when the quality of supporting evidence is examined, and when the logic of the speaker's arguments is examined carefully.

The aim of empathic listening is to help the speaker, not the receiver. Various helping responses include advising, judging, analyzing, questioning, supporting, prompting, and paraphrasing the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Listeners can be most helpful when they use a variety of styles, focus on the emotional dimensions of a message, and avoid being too judgmental.



KEY TERMS

action-oriented listeners 126	listening 116
advising 138	paraphrasing 131
ambushers 120	people-oriented listeners 126
analyzing 139	prompting 143
attending 117	pseudolistening 119
content-oriented listeners 126	questioning 140
counterfeit question 130	remembering 117
critical listening 134	residual message 118
defensive listening 120	responding 117
empathic listening 137	selective listening 119
hearing 116	sincere question 130
informational listening 127	stage hogs 120
insensitive listeners 120	supporting 142
insulated listeners 120	time-oriented listeners 127
judging 138	understanding 117



ACTIVITIES

- 1. Recognizing Listening Misconceptions** You can see how listening misconceptions affect your life by identifying important situations when you have fallen for each of the following assumptions. In each case, describe the consequences of believing these erroneous assumptions.
 - Thinking that, because you were hearing a message, you were listening to it.
 - Believing that listening effectively is natural and effortless.
 - Assuming that other listeners were understanding a message in the same way as you.

- 2. Your L.Q. (Listening Quotient)** Explain the poor listening behaviors listed on pages 119–121 to someone who knows you well. Then ask your informant to describe which, if any of them, you use. Also explore the consequences of your listening behavior.

- 3. Your Listening Style Preferences** You can analyze your effectiveness as a listener by answering the following questions.

1. Which of the listening styles described earlier do you use?
2. Does your listening style change in various situations, or do you use the same style most or all of the time?
3. What are the consequences (beneficial and harmful) of the listening styles you use?
4. How could you adapt your listening styles to improve your communication effectiveness?

- 4. Informational Listening Practice** Effective informational listening isn't easy. It takes hard work and concentration. You can improve your skill in this important area and convince yourself of the difference good informational listening makes by following these steps.

1. Find a partner with whom you have an important relationship. This may be a family member, lover, friend, fellow worker, or even an "enemy" with whom you interact frequently.
2. Invite your partner to explain his or her side of an issue that the two of you have difficulty discussing. Your job during this conversation is to understand your partner. You should not even attempt to explain your position. (If you find the prospect of trying to understand the other person distressing, consider how this attitude might interfere with your ability to listen carefully.)
3. As your partner explains his or her point of view, use the skills outlined on pages 131–133 to help you understand. You can discover how well you are grasping your partner's position by occasionally paraphrasing what you think he or she is saying. If your partner verifies your paraphrase as correct, go on with the conversation. If not, try to listen again and play back the message until the partner confirms your understanding.

4. After the conversation is over, ask yourself the following questions:
 - As you listened, how accurate was your first understanding of the speaker's statements?
 - How did your understanding of the speaker's position change after you used paraphrasing?
 - Did you find that the gap between your position and that of your partner narrowed as a result of your both using paraphrasing?
 - How did you feel at the end of your conversation? How does this feeling compare to your usual emotional state after discussing controversial issues with others?
 - How might your life change if you used paraphrasing at home? At work? With friends?
5. **Empathic Response Styles** This exercise will help improve your ability to listen empathically in the most successful manner. For each of the following statements:
 1. Write separate responses, using each of the following styles:
 - Advising
 - Judging
 - Analyzing
 - Questioning
 - Supporting
 - Prompting
 - Paraphrasing
 2. Discuss the pros and cons of using each response style.
 3. Identify which response seems most effective, explaining your decision.
 - a. At a party, a guest you have just met for the first time says, "Everybody seems like they've been friends for years. I don't know anybody here. How about you?"
 - b. Your best friend has been quiet lately. When you ask if anything is wrong, she snaps "no!" in an irritated tone of voice.
 - c. A fellow worker says, "The boss keeps making sexual remarks to me. I think it's a come-on, and I don't know what to do."
 - d. It's registration time at college. One of your friends asks if you think he should enroll in the communication class you've taken.

- e. Someone with whom you live remarks, "It seems like this place is always a mess. We get it cleaned up, and then an hour later it's trashed."

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about listening, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Burleson, Brant R., and MacGeorge, Erina. "Supportive Communication," in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd ed., Mark L. Knapp and John A. Daly, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

This chapter describes the damaging consequences that come from a lack of social support, as well as describing how communicators can provide support for one another in a variety of ways, including listening.

Burleson, Brant R. "Emotional Support Skills," in *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction Skills*, John O. Greene and Brant R. Burleson, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002.

This review of research describes what types of communication provide emotional support.

Cline, Rebecca J. Welch. "Communication in Social Support Groups," in *Handbook of Group Communication Theory and Research*, Lawrence R. Frey, ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

A description of how social support operates in groups, providing a useful supplement to the discussion of mostly dyadic support described in this chapter.

Foss, Sonja, and Cindy L. Griffin. "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric." *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995):2-18.

The authors propose an alternative to the argumentative approach most communicators take when disagreeing with others. The article provides a clear argument for more informational listening.

Leeds, Dorothy. *The Seven Powers of Questions: Secrets to Successful Communication in Life and Work*. New York: Penguin, 2001.

This practical book shows the many ways questions can be useful beyond seeking information. They can encourage others to open up, and even enhance our control over a situation.

Purdy, Michael, and Deborah Borisoff. *Listening in Everyday Life: A Personal and Professional Approach*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997.

This collection of readings offers practical information about listening in a variety of contexts including health care, legal, and service industries. In addition, chapters discuss how the influences of gender, culture, and group settings affect listening.

Steil, Lyman K., and Richard K. Bommelje. *Listening Leaders: The 10 Golden Rules to Listen, Lead & Succeed*. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2004.

A comprehensive look at how leaders can apply the subtle yet important skill of listening to make a difference in their organizations.

Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate listening and responding styles, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Ineffective Listening

Jerry Maguire (1996). Rated R.

Jerry Maguire (Tom Cruise) is a high-powered pro sports agent who is so focused on success that he doesn't have time to truly listen to any of his clients. In true Hollywood fashion, Jerry only learns the importance of listening when he is close to losing the most important people in his life. As the film ends, Jerry is redeemed by the love of a good woman (Renée Zellweger), a young boy (Jonathan Lipnicki), and good friends (Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Regina King).

Supportive Listening

Good Will Hunting (1997). Rated R.

Will Hunting (Matt Damon) is a Boston janitor who spends most of his free time with his friends, boozing and fighting. It soon becomes apparent that Will is a natural-born mathematical genius who can intuitively solve problems that have baffled some of the best minds in the world. Will turns down offers of jobs that take advantage of his gift, preferring a lifestyle that seems to point him toward jail, or worse. The film depicts the efforts of four people who try to head Will away from a life of self-destruction: Will's best friend Chuckie (Ben Affleck), his girlfriend Skylar (Minnie Driver), a MIT professor Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgard) who discovered Will's talents, and Lambeau's college roommate, Sean McGuire (Robin Williams), a gifted counselor.

From a communication perspective, it is instructive to see the array of communication styles and strategies these four characters use to help Will turn his life around. As in real life, no single approach is the best. Will's breakthrough occurs in response

to McGuire's skilled counseling, but it is clear that his hope for change and growth depends on the genuine concern of all four characters—each of whom offers help in a highly personal way.

Dead Man Walking (1995). Rated R.

Catholic nun Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) agrees to help convicted murderer Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) appeal his death sentence. As time goes on, she realizes that Poncelet is, indeed, guilty of the awful crimes for which he has been convicted.

Sister Helen's most important goal is to get Matthew to take responsibility for his actions. Rather than pushing or trying to persuade him, she listens respectfully and asks open-ended questions that allow Poncelet to reach conclusions on his own about his deeds. While she is shaken by the awfulness of Poncelet's crime, Sister Helen remains steadfast in her respect for him and her concern with his soul. In the face of a horrible crime, Sister Helen Prejean provides viewers with compelling proof that unconditional positive regard can achieve mighty results.