



Essentials of Business Communication

Week 2



“Did you know?”

- ▶ It is estimated that more than 50 percent of our work time is spent listening.
- ▶ Immediately following a 10-minute presentation, average people retain about half of what they hear and only one quarter after 48 hours.
- ▶ Sixty percent of all management problems are related to listening.
- ▶ We misinterpret, misunderstand, or change 70 to 90 percent of what we hear.”

Valarie Washington, CEO, Think 6 Results

TV and radio host Larry King said, “I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening.”

11 techniques of Building Solid Listening Skills

You can reverse the harmful effects of poor habits by making a conscious effort to become an active listener. This means becoming involved. You can't sit back and hear whatever a lazy mind happens to receive. The following keys will help you become an active and effective listener

- ▶ Stop talking. The first step to becoming a good listener is to stop talking. Let others explain their views. Learn to concentrate on what the speaker is saying, not on what your next comment will be.
- ▶ Control your surroundings. Whenever possible, remove competing sounds. Close windows or doors, turn off TVs and smartphones, and move away from loud people, noisy appliances, or engines. Choose a quiet time and place for listening.
- ▶ Establish a receptive mind-set. Expect to learn something by listening. Strive for a positive and receptive frame of mind. If the message is complex, think of it as mental gymnastics. It is hard work but good exercise to stretch and expand the limits of your mind.
- ▶ Keep an open mind. We all sift through and filter information based on our own biases and values. For improved listening, discipline yourself to listen objectively. Be fair to the speaker. Hear what is really being said, not what you want to hear.
- ▶ Listen for main points. Heighten your concentration and satisfaction by looking for the speaker's central themes. Congratulate yourself when you find them!

11 techniques of Building Solid Listening Skills

- Capitalize on lag time. Make use of the quickness of your mind by reviewing the speaker's points. Anticipate what is coming next. Evaluate evidence the speaker has presented. Don't allow yourself to daydream. Try to guess what the speaker's next point will be.
- Listen between the lines. Focus both on what is spoken and what is unspoken. Listen for feelings as well as for facts.
- Judge ideas, not appearances. Concentrate on the content of the message, not on its delivery. Avoid being distracted by the speaker's looks, voice, or mannerisms. ■
- Hold your fire. Force yourself to listen to the speaker's entire argument or message before responding. Such restraint may enable you to understand the speaker's reasons and logic before you jump to false conclusions.
- Take selective notes. In some situations thoughtful notetaking may be necessary to record important facts that must be recalled later. Select only the most important points so that the notetaking process does not interfere with your concentration on the speaker's total message.
- Provide feedback. Let the speaker know that you are listening. Nod your head and maintain eye contact. Ask relevant questions at appropriate times. Getting involved improves the communication process for both the speaker and the listener.

Overcoming Barriers to Effective Listening

- ▶ As you have seen, bad habits and distractions can interfere with effective listening. Have any of the following barriers and distractions prevented you from hearing what has been said?
- ▶ Physical barriers. You cannot listen if you cannot hear what is being said. Physical impediments include hearing disabilities, poor acoustics, and noisy surroundings. It is also difficult to listen if you are ill, tired, or uncomfortable.
- ▶ Psychological barriers. Everyone brings to the communication process a unique set of cultural, ethical, and personal values. Each of us has an idea of what is right and what is important. If other ideas run counter to our preconceived thoughts, we tend to tune out speakers and thus fail to receive their messages.
- ▶ Language problems. Unfamiliar words can destroy the communication process because they lack meaning for the receiver. In addition, emotion-laden, or charged, words can adversely affect listening. If the mention of words such as bankruptcy or real estate meltdown has an intense emotional impact, a listener may be unable to focus on the words that follow.
- ▶ Nonverbal distractions. Many of us find it hard to listen if a speaker is different from what we view as normal. Unusual clothing or speech mannerisms, body twitches, or a radical hairstyle can cause enough distraction to prevent us from hearing what the speaker has to say.

TABLE 2.2 What Makes an Effective Listener?

Effective Listeners	Ineffective Listeners
Listen actively	Listen passively
Stay focused on the speaker and the conversation	Allow their minds to wander, are easily distracted, work on unrelated tasks
Take careful notes, when applicable	Take no notes or ineffective notes
Make frequent eye contact with the speaker (depends on culture to some extent)	Make little or no eye contact, or inappropriate eye contact
Keep their emotions under control and don't let their own anxieties hinder the conversation	Allow their emotions to negatively influence the conversation
Mentally paraphrase key points to maintain attention level and ensure comprehension	Fail to paraphrase
Adjust listening style to the situation	Listen with the same style, regardless of the situation
Give the speaker nonverbal feedback (such as nodding to show agreement or raising eyebrows to show surprise or skepticism)	Fail to give the speaker nonverbal feedback
Save questions or points of disagreement until an appropriate time	Interrupt whenever they disagree or don't understand
Engage the other person with questions or encouragement; validate the other person's feelings	Fail to engage; offer no encouragement or expression of understanding
Overlook stylistic differences and focus on the speaker's message	Are distracted by or unduly influenced by stylistic differences; are judgmental
Make distinctions between main points and supporting details	Are unable to distinguish main points from details
Look for opportunities to learn	Assume they already know everything that's important to know

Sources: Based on Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "What Great Listeners Actually Do," *Harvard Business Review*, 14 July 2016, hbr.org; Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins, "What Gets in the Way of Listening," *Harvard Business Review*, 14 April 2016, hbr.org; Madelyn Burley-Allen, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill*, (New York: Wiley, 1996), 70–71, 119–120; Judi Brownell, *Listening: Attitudes, Principles, and Skills* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002); 3, 9, 83, 89, 125; Larry Barker and Kittie Watson, *Listen Up* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 8, 9, 64.




Mastering Nonverbal Skills

- ▶ Nonverbal communication can outweigh words in the way it influences how others perceive you. You can harness the power of silent messages by reviewing the following tips for improving nonverbal communication skills:
- ▶ Establish and maintain eye contact. Remember that appropriate eye contact signals interest, attentiveness, strength, and credibility.
- ▶ Use posture to show interest. Encourage interaction by leaning forward, sitting or standing erect, and looking alert.
- ▶ Reduce or eliminate physical barriers. Move out from behind a desk or lectern; arrange meeting chairs in a circle.
- ▶ Improve your decoding skills. Watch facial expressions and body language to understand the complete verbal and nonverbal messages being communicated.
- ▶ Probe for more information. When you perceive nonverbal cues that contradict verbal meanings, politely seek additional cues (I'm not sure I understand, Please tell me more about . . ., or Do you mean that . . .?).



Mastering Nonverbal Skills

- ▶ Interpret nonverbal meanings in context. Make nonverbal assessments only when you understand a situation or a culture.
 - ▶ Associate with people from different cultures. Learn about other cultures to widen your knowledge and tolerance of intercultural nonverbal messages.
 - ▶ Appreciate the power of appearance. Keep in mind that the appearance of your business documents, your business space, and yourself sends immediate positive or negative messages to others.
 - ▶ Observe yourself on video. Ensure that your verbal and nonverbal messages are in sync by recording and evaluating yourself making a presentation.
 - ▶ Enlist friends and family. Ask friends and family members to monitor your conscious and unconscious body movements and gestures to help you become a more effective communicator
- 

Channels of Communication

- ▶ The medium is the form a message takes and the channel is the system used to deliver the message. The distinction between the two isn't always crystal clear, and some people use the terms in different ways, but these definitions are a useful way to think about the possibilities for business communication.
- ▶ The simplest way to categorize media choices is to divide them into oral (spoken), written, and visual. Each of these media can be delivered through digital and nondigital channels, which creates six basic combinations: oral medium-In-person, Oral medium-digital channel, Written medium-printed channel, Written medium-digital channel, Visual medium-printed channel, Visual medium-digital channel.

Oral Medium, in-Person Channel

- ▶ The oral medium, in-person combo involves talking with people who are in the same location, whether it's a one-on-one conversation over lunch or a more formal speech or presentation. Being in the same physical space is a key distinction because it enables the nuances of nonverbal communication more than any other media/channel combo.
- ▶ By giving people the ability to see, hear, and react to each other, in-person communication is useful for encouraging people to ask questions, make comments, and work together to reach a consensus or decision. Face-to-face interaction is particularly helpful in complex, emotionally charged situations in which establishing or fostering a business relationship is important.² Managers who engage in frequent “walk-arounds,” chatting with employees face-to-face, can get input, answer questions, and interpret important business events and trends.

Oral Medium, Digital Channel

- ▶ Oral media via digital channels include any transmission of voice via electronic means, both live and recorded, including telephone calls, podcasts, and voicemail messages. Live phone conversations offer the give-and-take of in-person conversations and can be the best alternative to talking in person. Without a video component, however, they can't provide the nuances of nonverbal communication. Podcasts can be a good way to share lectures, commentary, and other spoken content.

Written Medium, Print Channel

- ▶ Written, printed documents are the classic format of business communication. Memos are brief printed documents traditionally used for the routine, day-to-day exchange of information within an organization. Letters are brief written messages sent to customers and other recipients outside the organization. Reports and proposals are usually longer than memos and letters, although both can be created in memo or letter format. These documents come in a variety of lengths, ranging from a few pages to several hundred, and usually have a fairly formal tone.

Written Medium, Digital Channel

- ▶ Most of your business communication efforts will involve written digital messages, with everything from super-short tweets to website content to book-length reports distributed as portable document format (PDF) files (see Figure 4.4). Business uses of written digital messages keep evolving as companies look for ways to communicate more effectively. For example, email has been a primary business medium for several decades, but it is being replaced in many cases by a variety of other digital formats.⁴ Chapters 7 and 8 take a closer look at various written-digital combinations, from email to instant messaging (IM) to social networks.

Visual Medium, Print Channel

- ▶ Photographs and diagrams can be effective communication tools for conveying emotional content, spatial relationships, technical processes, and other content that can be difficult to describe using words alone. You may occasionally create visual printed messages as standalone items, but most will be used as supporting material in printed documents.

Visual Medium, Digital Channel

- ▶ Business messages can come alive when conveyed by visual media in digital channels. Infographics, interactive diagrams, animation, and digital video have the potential to engage audiences in ways that other formats can't, which is why the use of visual elements in business communication continues to grow.
- ▶ Traditional business messages rely primarily on text, with occasional support from graphics such as charts, graphs, or diagrams to help illustrate points discussed in the text. However, many business communicators are discovering the power of messages in which the visual element is dominant and supported by small amounts of text. For the purposes of this discussion, think of visual media as formats in which one or more visual elements play a central role in conveying the message content.

16 Messages that combine powerful visuals with supporting text can be effective for a number of reasons. Today's audiences are pressed for time and bombarded with messages, so anything that communicates quickly is welcome.

- Visuals are also effective at describing complex ideas and processes because they can reduce the work required for an audience to identify the parts and relationships that make up the whole.

TABLE 4.1 Medium/Channel Combinations: Advantages and Disadvantages

Medium/Channel	Advantages	Disadvantages
Oral, in-person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunity for immediate feedback• Easily resolve misunderstandings and negotiate meanings• Involve rich nonverbal cues (both physical gesture and vocal inflection)• Allow expression of the emotion behind your message	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Restrict participation to those physically present• Unless recorded, provide no permanent, verifiable record of the communication• Reduce communicator's control over the message
Oral, digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can provide opportunity for immediate feedback (live phone or online conversations)• Not restricted to participants in the same location• Allow time-shifted consumption (for example, podcasts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack nonverbal cues other than voice inflections• Can be tedious to listen to if not audience focused (recorded messages)
Written, printed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow writers to plan and control their messages• Can reach geographically dispersed audiences• Offer a permanent, verifiable record• Minimize the distortion that can accompany oral messages• Can be used to avoid immediate interactions• Deemphasize any inappropriate emotional components• Give recipients time to process messages before responding (compared to oral communication)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer limited opportunities for timely feedback• Lack the rich nonverbal cues provided by oral media• Often take more time and more resources to create and distribute• Can require special skills to prepare or produce if document is elaborate

Written, digital	<p>Generally, all the advantages of written printed documents plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast delivery • Can reach geographically dispersed audiences • Flexibility of multiple formats and channels, from microblogs to wikis • Flexibility to structure messages in creative ways, such as writing a headline on Twitter and linking to the full message on a blog • Ability to link to related and more in-depth information • Can increase accessibility and openness in an organization through broader sharing • Enable audience interaction through social media features • Ease of integrating with other media types, such as embedded videos or photos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be limited in terms of reach and capability (for example, on Twitter you can reach only those people who follow you or search for you) • Require Internet or mobile phone connectivity • Vulnerable to security and privacy problems • Are easy to overuse (sending too many messages to too many recipients) • Create privacy risks and concerns (exposing confidential data, employer monitoring, accidental forwarding) • Entail security risks (viruses, spyware; network breaches) • Create productivity concerns (frequent interruptions, nonbusiness usage)
Visual, printed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can quickly convey complex ideas and relationships • Often less intimidating than long blocks of text • Can reduce the burden on the audience to figure out how the pieces of a message or concept fit • Can be easy to create in spreadsheets and other software (simple charts and graphs), then integrate with reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can require artistic skills to design • Require some technical skills to create • Can require more time to create than equivalent amount of text • Can be expensive to print
Visual, digital	<p>Generally, all the advantages of visual printed documents and all the advantages of written digital formats plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can personalize and enhance the experience for audience members • Offer the persuasive power of multimedia formats, particularly video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential time, cost, and skills needed to create • Can require large amounts of bandwidth

Think about how you communicate? How do you communicate verbally? What nonverbal cues do you use when you are disinterested? Excited? Nervous? Are you a good listener? Can you write a concise, clearly articulated message?



Key points



- Confront barriers to effective listening, and start building your listening skills.
- Most of us are poor listeners; we can learn active listening by removing physical and psychological barriers, overlooking language problems, and eliminating distractions.
- A fast processing speed allows us to let our minds wander; we fake attention and prefer to talk than to listen.
- Poor listening can be overcome as long as we stop talking, focus fully on others, control distractions, keep an open mind, and listen for the speaker's main ideas.
- Capitalizing on lag time, listening between the lines, judging ideas instead of appearances, taking good notes, and providing feedback are other methods for building listening skills