

Chapter 5: Listening and Responding Skills

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 5.1 Define listening, and describe five elements of the listening process.
- 5.2 Identify characteristics of four listening styles.
- 5.3 List and describe barriers to effective listening.
- 5.4 Identify and use skills to enhance comprehension, empathy, and critical listening.
- 5.5 Identify and use skills to effectively and appropriately respond to others.
- 5.6 Identify and use skills to effectively and appropriately confirm others

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Listening Defined

Learning Objective 5.1: Define listening, and describe five elements of the listening process.

- A. **Listening** is defined as a complex process of selecting, attending to, creating meaning from, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages, whereas **hearing** is the physiological process of decoding sounds.
- B. Selecting
 - 1. **Selecting** is choosing one sound as you sort through the various sounds competing for your attention.
 - 2. When communicating with other people, you select which verbal and nonverbal messages you want to focus on.
- C. Attending
 - 1. **Attending** is focusing on the sound you select.
 - 2. You attend to sounds and messages that meet your needs or are consistent with your attitudes or interests.
 - 3. You will be more likely to attend to messages that are important to you or are novel or intense.
 - 4. Conflict, humor, new ideas, and concrete things command your attention more readily than abstract things do.
 - 5. Your attention is sometimes selective.
- D. Understanding
 - 1. **Understanding** is assigning meaning to sounds you select and to which you attend.
 - 2. People understand best if they can relate what they are hearing to something they already know.
 - 3. The greater the similarities between individuals, the greater the likelihood for more accurate understanding.
 - 4. You understand best that which you also experience.
 - 5. Understanding happens when we derive meaning from the words we hear.

- E. Remembering
 - 1. **Remembering** is recalling information.
 - 2. Short-term memory is where you store almost all of the information you hear.
 - 3. The information we store in long-term memory includes events, conversations, and other data that are significant to us.
 - 4. People tend to remember dramatic and vital information, as well as inconsequential details connected with such information.
- F. Responding
 - 1. **Responding** is confirming your understanding of a message.
 - 2. You can respond nonverbally with direct eye contact or head nods.
 - 3. You can respond verbally by asking questions.

II. Listening Styles

Learning Objective 5.2: Identify characteristics of four listening styles.

- A. **Listening styles** are preferred ways of making sense out of spoken messages.
- B. Relational Listening Style
 - 1. **Relational listeners** tend to prefer listening to people's feelings and emotions.
 - 2. Relational listeners focus on empathizing and searching for common areas of interest.
 - 3. Relational listeners may be less apprehensive when interacting with others in small group and interpersonal interactions.
- C. Analytical Listening Style
 - 1. **Analytical listeners** focus on facts and tend to withhold judgment before reaching a specific conclusion.
 - 2. Analytical listeners tend to listen to an entire message before assessing the validity of the information they hear.
 - 3. Analytical listeners take the perspective of the person to whom they are listening, which helps them suspend judgment.
 - 4. These listeners also like information to be well organized so that they can clearly and easily analyze it.
 - 5. Analytical listeners prefer listening to rich message content and then find ways of organizing or making sense out of the information.
- D. Critical Listening Style
 - 1. **Critical listeners** are good at evaluating information they hear.
 - 2. Critical listeners are able to hone in on inconsistencies in what someone says.
 - 3. Critical listeners are comfortable listening to detailed, complex information and focusing on the facts, yet they are especially adept in noting contradictions in the facts presented.
 - 4. Critical listeners are also likely to catch errors in the overall logic and reasoning that is being used to reach a conclusion.
 - 5. Critical listeners tend to be a bit more skeptical than relational listeners are about the information they hear, and they engage in **second-guessing**, which is questioning the ideas and assumptions underlying a message to assess whether the information is true or false.

E. Task-Oriented Listening Style

1. **Task-oriented listeners** are interested in focusing more on achieving a specific outcome or accomplishing a task than on focusing on the communication relationship when they listen to others. They emphasize completing a specific transaction, such as solving a problem, taking action, or making a purchase.
2. Task-oriented listeners focus on verbs—what needs to be done.
3. They appreciate efficient communicators who are sensitive to how much time is involved in delivering a message.
4. Task-oriented listeners want to do something with the information they hear; they want it to serve a purpose or function.

F. Understanding Your Listening Style

1. Knowing your listening style can help you better understand how to adapt to various listening situations.
2. Being aware of your own preferred listening style and the needs of your communication partner can help you adopt a listening style that best suits the situation.
3. It is useful to be aware of the listening styles of others so you can communicate messages they are more likely to listen to.

In-Text Opportunity for Classroom Discussion

Relating to Diverse Others: Who Listens Better: Men or Women?

Researchers suggest that men and women listen differently. This feature presents findings about the differences between men's and women's listening patterns. Hold a class discussion about whether students agree with the research and whether there are other differences that they notice between the way that men and women listen.

III. Listening Barriers

Learning Objective 5.3: List and describe barriers to effective listening.

A. Being Self-Absorbed

1. Being self-absorbed causes us to focus on our own needs rather than the needs of others.
2. A self-absorbed listener is not focusing on his or her partner's message but is thinking of what he or she will say next.
3. **Conversational narcissism** is a focus on a personal agenda (ideas, experiences, and stories) rather than on the needs and ideas of others.
4. **Selective listening** is letting pre-formed biases, prejudices, and stereotypes cause us to hear what we want to hear, instead of listening to what a speaker actually said.
5. Remedy the problem of self-absorbed listening by self-diagnosing it.
 - a. Note consciously when you find yourself drifting off and thinking about your agenda rather than on the speaker.
 - b. Mentally, remind yourself to listen with greater energy and focus.

B. Unchecked Emotions

1. **Emotional noise** occurs when emotional arousal interferes with communication's effectiveness.
2. Certain words may be distracting to you.
3. Sometimes concepts, rather than specific words, cause an emotional eruption.
4. The emotional state of the speaker may also affect your ability to understand and evaluate what you hear.
5. Your challenge is to avoid emotional sidetracks and keep attention focused on the message by quieting the emotional noise.

C. Criticizing the Speaker

1. Being critical of the speaker may distract a listener from focusing on the message.
2. **Ambush listeners** are people who are overly critical and judgmental when listening to others.
3. Superficial factors, such as clothing, body size and shape, age, and other aspects of personal appearance all affect our interpretation of a message.

D. Differing Speech Rate and Thought Rate

1. The average person speaks at a rate of 125 words a minute, but, as a listener, you are able to process up to 600 or 800 words a minute.
2. You can turn your listening speed into an advantage if you use the extra time to summarize what a speaker is saying.

E. Information Overload

1. We are all constantly bombarded with sight and sound images.
2. Be alert for information interruptions when you are talking with others; do not assume that because you are ready to talk, the other person is ready to listen.

F. External Noise

1. The literal noise of sounds in the environment may compete with your attention while you are listening to others.
2. Other potential distractions may come from newspapers, music, TV, books, or your computer.
3. You can attempt to listen through the competing distractions or you can modify the environment to reduce them.

G. Listener Apprehension

1. **Listener apprehension** is the fear of misunderstanding, misinterpreting, or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages spoken by others.
2. Being nervous or apprehensive about misunderstanding the message may cause you to misunderstand it.
3. Try and overcome this apprehension by working harder and using techniques.
 - a. When listening to public speakers, take notes or record the information.
 - b. Take notes when talking on the phone.
 - c. When talking in person, mentally summarize the speaker's message.

IV. Improving Your Listening Skills

Learning Objective 5.4: Identify and use skills to enhance comprehension, empathy, and critical listening.

A. How to Improve Listening Comprehension Skills

1. **Stop**
 - a. The first thing you have to do to be a better listener is to stop focusing on your own mental messages and to be other-oriented.
 - i. Put your own thoughts aside.
 - ii. Be there mentally as well as physically.
 - iii. Make a conscious, mindful effort to listen.
 - iv. Take adequate time to listen; do not rush the speaker; be patient.
 - v. Be open-minded.
 - b. People who learn how to stop mental distractions can improve their listening comprehension.
2. **Look**
 - a. Nonverbal messages are powerful and are the primary ways we communicate feelings, emotions, and attitudes.
 - b. Look for the **meta-message**—the message about the message (the message a person is expressing via nonverbal means about the message articulated with words).
 - c. Another reason to look at another person is to establish eye contact, which signals that you are focusing your interest and attention on him or her.
 - d. Do not be distracted by nonverbal cues that can prevent you from interpreting the message correctly.
3. **Listen**
 - a. Work to become an active rather than passive listener.
 - b. Effective listeners embody all of the following skills:
 - i. Just listen—they do not interrupt.
 - ii. Respond appropriately and provide feedback.
 - iii. Appropriately contribute to the conversation.
4. **Determine Your Listening Goal**
 - a. You listen to other people for several reasons—to learn, to enjoy, to evaluate, or to provide support.
 - b. Consciously consider whether your listening style matches your listening goal.

In-Text Opportunity for Classroom Discussion

Improving Your Communication Skills: How to Identify Both Major Ideas and Details to Enhance Listening

This feature provides steps for students to consider to improve on their abilities to identify major ideas and details while listening. In pairs, have one student read the three statements, while the other student lists as many details as he or she can recall and summarizes the main point from each statement.

5. Transform Listening Barriers into Listening Goals
 - a. If you can transform listening barriers into listening goals, you will be well on your way to improving your listening skill.
 - b. Choose a communication environment free of distraction from other incoming information or noise.
6. Mentally Summarize the Details of the Message
 - a. When your listening goal is to remember a message, mentally summarize the details of the message.
 - b. Without a full understanding of the details, you will likely miss the speaker's main points.
7. Mentally Weave These Summaries into a Focused Major Point or a Series of Major Ideas
 - a. Link the facts you have organized in your mind with key points.
 - b. Use facts to enhance your critical thinking.
8. Practice Listening to Challenging Material
 - a. Listening skills deteriorate if people do not practice what they know.
 - b. Being motivated to listen while you practice will also enhance your listening competence.

In-Text Opportunity for Classroom Discussion

#communicationandtechnology: Being “Listened to” by our Facebook Friends

This feature research on how we turn to Facebook as a listening ear, particularly when life gets challenging. Hold a class discussion about students' perceptions on this phenomenon. In addition, ask students to discuss the following question: *how do you enhance your empathic listening skills online?*

B. How to Improve Empathic Listening Skills

1. **Empathy** is the emotional reaction that is similar to the reaction being experienced by the other person (i.e., feeling what another person is feeling).
2. Imagine What Your Partner Is Thinking
 - a. **Social decentering** is a cognitive process in which you take into account another person's thoughts, values, background, and perspectives as you interact with the person.
 - b. **Think About How You Would React**
 - i. Use your knowledge of what happened to you in the past to help you guess how someone else may feel.
 - c. **Reflect on What You Know About the Other Person**
 - i. You can also socially decenter based on the knowledge you have of the person with whom you are interacting.
 - d. **Consider How Most People Would React**
 - i. Apply your understanding of people in general.
 - ii. You can and draw on general ideas about how people in the category of person you are communicating with might react.

3. Imagine What Your Partner Is Feeling
 - a. Listen Compassionately
 - i. **Compassionate listening** is being nonjudgmental, nondefensive, and empathic to confirm the worth of another person.
 - ii. With compassionate listening, the listener is not only trying to experience the emotional response of others, but also accepting it, honoring it, and compassionately trying to confirm the worth of the other person.
 - iii. According to some researchers, your sensitivity and ability to empathize with others are based on your level of emotional intelligence.
 - b. Listen Actively
 - i. **Active listening** is the process of being physically and mentally engaged in the listening process and letting the listener know that you are engaged.
 - ii. Active listening confirms message understanding.
 - iii. Active listening confirms message affect.
 - iv. Empathy is different from **sympathy** in that you offer sympathy when you are simply acknowledging someone else's feelings.

In-Text Opportunity for Classroom Discussion

Communication and Emotion: What's Your Emotional Intelligence Level and Why Does It Matter?

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to be aware of, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of other people. This feature defines emotional intelligence and describes research illustrating the benefits of it, including that EI helps you accurately perceive messages, EI helps you think and work more effectively, EI helps you express emotion, and EI helps you manage your emotions. Use these main points as a starting point for a class discussion on the value of knowing your emotional intelligence and how this knowledge may improve your interactions with others.

C. How to Improve Critical Listening Skills

1. **Critical listening** involves listening to evaluate and assess the quality, appropriateness, value, or importance of information.
2. **Assess Information Quality**
 - a. **Information triage** is a process of sorting information.
 - b. Listening critically involves the same strategies as listening to comprehend.
 - c. Information triage involves examining the logic or reasoning used in the message.
 - d. It also involves being mindful of whether you are basing your evaluations on facts or inference.
3. **Separate Facts from Inference**
 - a. A **fact** is something that has been directly observed to be true and thus has proven to be true.
 - b. An **inference** is a conclusion based on speculation.

V. Improving Your Responding Skills

Learning Objective 5.5: Identify and use skills to effectively and appropriately respond to others.

A. How to Improve Accurate Responding Skills

1. Ask Appropriate Questions

- a. Asking appropriate questions can help not only you, but also the person sharing information with you.
- b. Asking appropriate and thoughtful questions also communicates that you were indeed listening and interested in what your partner had to say.

2. Accurately Paraphrase

- a. The only way to know whether you understand another person's message is to check your understanding of the facts and ideas by paraphrasing your understanding.
- b. **Paraphrase** to check the accuracy of your understanding.
- c. When a listener paraphrases the content and feelings of a speaker, the speaker is more likely to trust and value the listener.
- d. Accurately and appropriately paraphrasing the message not only increases message accuracy, but also enhances the quality of the relationship.

3. Provide Well-timed Responses

- a. Feedback is usually most effective when you offer it at the earliest opportunity.
- b. If a person is already sensitive and upset about something, delaying feedback can be wise.
- c. To provide feedback about a relationship, select a mutually agreeable place and time when both of you are rested and relaxed; avoid hurling feedback at someone "for his own good" immediately after he offends you.

4. Provide Usable Information

- a. When providing information to someone, be certain that it is useful and relevant.
- b. Selective feedback is best.
- c. When selecting meaningful information, try to cut down on the volume of information.

5. Appropriately Adapt Your Responses

- a. According to **communication accommodation theory**, we consciously and sometimes unconsciously adapt our messages to others to some extent.
- b. We accommodate our feedback to enhance the impact of our feedback.
- c. Increasing your volume, telling a story to clarify a point, and using shorter words and briefer messages are ways of adapting your feedback to ensure that your message is clear and well received.

B. How to Improve Empathic Responding Skills

1. Don't Interrupt

- a. Resist the temptation to blurt out a response or finish someone's sentence.
- b. If you must stop someone from talking to make a point, do so mindfully, rather than habitually and thoughtlessly.

2. Paraphrase Emotions

- a. The only way to know whether you understand another person's message is to check your understanding by paraphrasing.
- b. To paraphrase, you can respond with statements such as, "Are you saying . . ." or "You seem to be describing."
- c. By being an active listener, you can help your partner clarify a problem.
- d. If you use it judiciously, paraphrasing can help both you and your partner keep focused on the issues and ideas at hand.
- e. Do not use paraphrasing skills if you are not able to be open and accepting, if you do not trust the other person to find his or her own solution, if you are using these skills as a way of hiding yourself from another, or if you feel pressured, hassled, or tired.

3. Provide Helpful Social Support

- a. **Social support** is the **expression of empathy and concern** for others that is communicated while listening to them and offering positive and encouraging words.
- b. You provide social support when you offer positive, sincere, supportive messages, both verbal and nonverbal, when helping others deal with stress, anxiety, or uncertainty.
- c. Genuine, sincere support that is not overly expressive is usually best.

VI. Improving Your Confirmation Skills

Learning Objective 5.6: Identify and use skills to effectively and appropriately confirm others.

A. A **confirming response** is an other-oriented statement that causes another person to value him- or herself more. A **disconfirming response** is a statement that causes another person to value him- or herself less.

B. How to Provide Confirming Responses

1. Providing confirming responses requires careful listening and attention to the other person and is important to long-lasting relationships.

2. Direct Acknowledgment

- a. Direct acknowledgment takes place when you respond directly to something another person says and acknowledge the person is worth responding to.

3. Agreement About Judgments

- a. When you confirm someone's evaluation of something, you affirm that person's sense of taste and judgment.

4. Supportive Response

- a. When you offer reassurance and understanding, you confirm a person's right to his or her feelings.

5. Clarifying Response

- a. When you seek greater understanding of another's message, you confirm that he or she is worth your time and trouble.

6. Expression of Positive Feeling

- a. We feel valued and confirmed when someone agrees with our expression of joy or excitement.

7. Compliment

- a. When you tell people you like something about them, you confirm their sense of worth.

C. How to Avoid Disconfirming Responses

- 1. Avoid using disconfirming responses that undermine another person's self-worth.

2. Impervious Response

- a. When a person fails to acknowledge a statement or attempt to communicate, it can make the other person feel a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment.

3. Interrupting Response

- a. When you interrupt someone, you imply that what you have to say is more important than what the other person has to say.

4. Irrelevant Response

- a. An irrelevant response has nothing to do with what you were saying and may mean the other person was not listening.

5. Tangential Response

- a. A tangential response acknowledges the other person but is only minimally related to what was being discussed.

6. Impersonal Response

- a. A response that intellectualizes and uses the third person creates distance from the other person.

7. Incoherent Response

- a. Incoherent responses are inconsistent with the accompanying nonverbal behavior.

8. Incongruous Response

- a. An incongruous response is a verbal message that is inconsistent with nonverbal behavior. People usually believe the nonverbal message, but they feel confused as well.

In-Text Opportunity for Classroom Discussion

Applying an Other-Orientation to Listening and Responding Skills

This feature presents a poem about listening written by an anonymous author. Read the poem as a class. Hold a class discussion about the importance of listening when communicating with other people. In particular, ask students to discuss the following question in small groups: *How does listening communicate that you are being other-oriented?*

KEY TERMS

listening, LO 5.1	conversational narcissism, LO 5.3	emotional intelligence, LO 5.4
hearing, LO 5.1	selective listening, LO 5.3	critical listening, LO 5.4
selecting, LO 5.1	emotional noise, LO 5.3	information triage, LO 5.4
attending, LO 5.1	ambush listener, LO 5.3	fact, LO 5.4
understanding, LO 5.1	listener apprehension, LO 5.3	inference, LO 5.4
remembering, LO 5.1	meta-message, LO 5.4	paraphrase, LO 5.5
responding, LO 5.1	empathy, LO 5.4	communication accommodation theory, LO 5.5
listening style, LO 5.2	social decentering, LO 5.4	social support, LO 5.5
relational listeners, LO 5.2	compassionate listening, LO 5.4	confirming response, LO 5.6
analytical listeners, LO 5.2	active listening, LO 5.4	disconfirming response, LO 5.6
critical listeners, LO 5.2	sympathy, LO 5.4	
second-guessing, LO 5.2		
task-oriented listeners, LO 5.2		

LECTURE TOPICS

1. What is the difference between listening and hearing? What are some examples of times when you only heard but did not listen? What are some examples of times when you heard and listened? What changed in your behavior between the hearing (but not listening) example and the listening example?
2. How does listening improve your communication with other people? How does not listening hinder your communication with other people?
3. What are some ways that you can improve your own listening skills? What are some ways that you can improve your responding skills? What are some ways that you can improve your confirmation skills?

GROUP IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

1. **Video Application and Class Discussion—*Good Will Hunting*.** The movie *Good Will Hunting* contains multiple therapy sessions between psychiatrist Sean Maguire (brilliantly played by Robin Williams) and troubled Will Hunting (Matt Damon). Williams's Maguire captures empathic listening in a way that leaves a lasting impression on viewers. A therapeutic breakthrough scene in which Maguire repeatedly tells Will Hunting, "It's not your fault. . . . It's not your fault," shows, in a compelling and deeply moving way, how listening can lead to trust and depth in human relationships. This movie could be shown in its entirety (time permitting), or you could use selected "therapy" scenes to demonstrate various facets of empathic listening.

2. **Am I Listening?** Each student should make a list of seven people that fall into each of the following four categories:
 - Someone to whom you listen
 - Someone you should listen to but do not
 - Someone to whom you do not listen at all
 - Someone to whom you should NOT listen, but do

Then divide students into small groups to discuss why they placed a certain person in each category. In their small groups, have students also discuss the following questions: *What makes them listen to someone to whom they should not? What makes them not listen to someone to whom they should listen? What characteristics of these people make them important to listen to or not listen to?*
3. **The Therapeutic Power of Listening.** Invite a counselor, therapist, psychiatrist, priest, or minister (listening professionals) to class to discuss the power of listening in situations in which there is strict confidentiality. You might ask your guest(s) to indicate whether they primarily see their job as one of talking or listening. If you ask multiple guests at one time, you might put together a panel discussion and look at the role of listening in various spheres of life, including marriage, work, therapy, religion, and so on.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Listening Across Different Environments.** How do students adapt their listening to different interactions that they encounter weekly? Have students write a reflection about the adaptations that they make at school, at home, when they are with their significant other, when they are with friends, when they are with family. Do these applications tend to be similar or different? How so?
2. **What Is Your Listening Style?** During the next twenty-four-hour period, have students keep a “listening journal” that describes particular listening situations, including the goal, the time of day, the content/reason for listening, and the listening style that they used during a particular interaction. In reviewing their listening journal, have students answer the following two questions:
 - Write about the listening style you used most frequently. Are you surprised by this finding, and why or why not?
 - Write about the listening style with which you were most comfortable and explain why you think you were more comfortable.
3. **Emotional Intelligence.** Have students take an emotional intelligence quiz. The following link (<http://www.ihhp.com/free-eq-quiz/>) provides an example of one type of online quiz that students may complete. You can find other quizzes online. After students complete the quiz, have them write a reflection on whether they agree or disagree with the score that they received, and explain why.

REVEL WRITING EXERCISES

Journal Writing

5.1 Journal: The Listening Process. If you were not really listening when someone was speaking to you, should you admit you were not listening and ask the person to repeat what he or she said? Or should you say you could not hear or got distracted? Is it best to be honest in such a situation?

5.2 Journal: Your Listening Style. Describe several situations in which you might modify or adapt your primary listening style. Do you find that you consciously adapt your communication to others' listening styles? When and why? What factors contribute to the need to adapt your listening style?

5.3 Journal: Barriers to Effective Listening. What daily challenges do you encounter in listening and, especially, attending to messages? Pause to consider some of the “noise” around you right now, including electronic and internal (emotional) or external distractions. What effect does this noise have on your ability to listen to others?

5.4 Journal: Enhancing Comprehension. You know you should be focusing on what your friend is telling you, but you are just not tuning in on her message. What are specific ways you can implement the “stop” skill to calm your mind and focus on what your friend is saying?

5.5 Journal: Responding to Others. Your friend Kale is telling you about his new job and plans to move to a new city. However, in his enthusiasm for telling you about his new opportunities, he has not been clear about what the job is. Other details about his future are muddy as well. You want to be supportive. What are two or three specific and appropriate questions you might ask him to help you better understand his message and support his new opportunities?

5.6 Journal: Confirming Others. If you do not feel like providing a confirming, supportive statement and you know someone is seeking such confirmation, is it ethical to fake being supportive when you know your comments would be insincere? Should you always be honest about expressing how you feel toward someone?

Shared Writing: Listening Regrets

Bring to class a fable, folktale, or children's story from a culture other than your own. As a group, analyze the cultural values implied by the story or characters in the story.