**Active Listening**

Considerable evidence suggests that your own listening skills could be improved. Within 24 hours after listening to a lecture or speech, you will most likely recall only about 50 percent of the message. Forty-eight hours later, you are above average if you remember more than 25 percent of the message. Learning about listening can help you increase your listening skills so you can gain more benefits from the speeches you hear.

1. **Listening Components**

Listening is a complex process of selecting, attending to, understanding, remembering, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. Being able to describe these listening components can help you retain more and become a better speaker and listener.

**Selecting**. To select a sound, the first stage of listening, is to *single out* a message from several competing messages. As a public speaker, your job is to develop a presentation that motivates your listeners to select your message.

**Attending**. The *sequel* to selecting is attending. To attend to a sound is to focus on it. One of your key challenges as ***a public speaker is to capture and then hold your audience’s attention.***

**Understanding**. *Boiled down to its essence*, communication is the process of understanding, or making sense of our experiences and sharing that sense with others. We understand something when we create meaning out of what we experience. ***The challenge of being understood comes back to a focus on the audience***.

**Remembering**. The next stage in the listening process is remembering. To remember is to recall ideas and information. You hear more than one billion words each year, but how much information do you *retain*? It depends on how well you listen. Ask yourself what is the take-away message?

**Responding**. The final stage in the listening process is to respond. When listeners respond, they react to what they have heard with their behavior. For example, it could be that you want them simply to remember and restate your key ideas. Or you may want them to vote for someone, buy something, or enroll in a course. That’s why it’s useful ***for public speakers to develop specific purposes for their talks.***

***Q1: Among the five components of listening process, which one isn’t familiar to you? How does that knowledge help you communicate effectively as a public speaker?***

**Answer:**

1. **Barriers to Effective Listening**
2. **Listener Fatigue**

We spend a large part of each day listening. That’s both good news and bad news. The good news is that because we listen a lot, we have the potential to become effective listeners. The bad news is that instead of getting better at it, we often *tune out* because we hear so much information that we get tired of listening and reduce our concentration on the message. Listening researchers have developed what they call the working memory theory of listening, which explains why we sometimes just don’t listen well. The theory suggests that when a listener’s capacity is reached (when our working memory is full), then it’s harder to concentrate and remember what we hear.

1. **Personal Concern**

You are sitting in your English class on a Friday afternoon. It’s a beautiful day. You slump into your seat, open your notebook, and prepare to take notes on the lecture. As the professor talks about an upcoming assignment, you begin to think about how you are going to spend your Saturday. One thought leads to another as you mentally plan your weekend. Suddenly you hear your professor say, “For Monday’s test, you will be expected to know the principles I’ve just reviewed.” What principles?

What test? You were present in class, and you did hear the professor’s lecture, but you’re not sure what was said. Your own thoughts are among the biggest competitors for your attention when you are a member of an audience. Most of us would rather listen to our own inner speech than to a public speaker’s message.

1. **Outside Distractions**

While sitting in class, you notice the person in front of you checking Weibo on her tablet computer. Two classmates behind you are discussing their favorite game episodes. You feel your phone vibrate in your pocket, which means someone just sent you a text. Looking out the window you see a varsity football hero struggling to break into his car to retrieve the keys he left in the ignition.

As your English professor drones on about the principle of public speaking, you find it difficult to focus on his lecture. Most of us don’t listen well when physical distractions compete with the speaker. And, with lives immersed in technology, the next distraction is only a text, phone call, or tweet away. Research has found that merely the visible presence of a smartphone can be a communication distraction and reduce our listening effectiveness. We can’t resist checking to see if

someone wants to communicate with us.

1. **Prejudice**

Sometimes we make snap judgments about a speaker based on his or her appearance and then fail to listen because we have already dismissed the speaker’s ideas as inconsequential or irrelevant. For example, if we know someone backs a different political party, practices a different religion, or supports causes we don’t, we may be tempted to dismiss their ideas even before we hear them.

On the flip side, some people too readily accept what someone says just because they like the way the person looks, sounds, or dresses. For example, we tend to believe that Asian Americans are much better in math. Such positive prejudices can also inhibit your ability to listen accurately to a message. We may have a favorable bias because we think the speaker shares our beliefs. We may also prejudge a message because we are biased for or against the message and messenger.

1. **Difference between thought rate and speech rate**

Ralph Nichols, a pioneer in listening research and training, has identified a listening problem that centers on the way you process the words you hear.12 Most people talk at a rate of 125 words a minute. But you have the ability to listen seven to ten times faster, to as many as 700 to 1,200 words a minute! The difference between your ability to process words and the speed at which a speaker can produce them gives you time to ignore a speaker periodically. Eventually, you stop listening; the extra time allows you to daydream and drift away from the message.

Nichols suggests that the different rates of speech and thought need not be a listening liability. Instead of drifting away from the speech, you can enhance your listening effectiveness by mentally summarizing what the speaker has said from time to time.

***Q2: What can you do to overcome those listening barriers as either a listener or a public speaker? Write down your suggestion in the following table.***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Listening Barriers | What can listeners do? | What can speakers do? |
| Listening fatigue |  |  |
| Personal Concern |  |  |
| Outside distraction |  |  |
| Prejudice |  |  |
| Difference between speech rate and thought rate |  |  |

1. **Listening type**

New research suggests that not everyone listens to information in the same way. There are at least four different listening styles—preferred ways of making sense out of spoken messages. Listening researchers have discovered that many listeners have one of the following listening styles: relational, analytical, critical, or task-oriented. Understanding your listening style can help you become a better and more flexible listener. About 40 percent of listeners have one primary listening style; another 40 percent use more than one style; and about 20 percent don’t have a listening style preference. There is evidence that you adapt your style to fit your listening goal. The best listeners are flexible listeners who can adapt their style to fit the occasion and the person speaking.

1. **Relational-Oriented Listeners** If you are comfortable listening to people express feelings and emotions, most likely you are a relational-oriented listener. This type of listener is highly empathic and attempts to seek common ground with the person he or she is listening to. Relational-oriented listeners are also easily moved by *poignant* illustrations and anecdotes. They enjoy hearing stories about people and personal relationships. When speaking with others in interpersonal and group situations, they are generally less apprehensive than other types of listeners.
2. **Task-Oriented Listeners** Task-oriented listeners want to know what to do with the information they hear. They listen for the verbs—the action words that indicate what task should be completed after listening to the information. The task-oriented listener wants people to get to the point and listens for actions that need to be taken. To a task-oriented listener, a long story or a lengthy personal example without some direction is less satisfying than a call for action. Task-oriented listeners also seem to be more *skeptical* than people with other listening styles. They prefer to be given evidence to support the recommendations for action.
3. **Analytical Listeners** Analytical listeners prefer to listen to complex information laced with facts and details. They often *withhold* judgment before reaching a specific conclusion. You’re an analytical listener if you reject messages because they don’t have adequate evidence to support their conclusions. In addition, analytical listeners don’t like *rambling* stories that don’t seem to have a point; they want to know what the key facts are rather than listen to a long narrative. Analytical listeners make good judges or lawyers because they enjoy listening to debates and hearing arguments for and against ideas.
4. **Critical Listeners** You’re a critical listener if you spend time evaluating the messages you hear. Critical listeners are comfortable listening to detailed, complex information. yet can focus on contradictions and inconsistencies in the information presented. Critical listeners are also likely to catch errors in the overall reasoning and evidence that are used to reach a conclusion. Knowing your listening style can help you better adapt to a speaker whose style is different from your own. The best listeners adapt their style to fit the situation and the listening goal.

***Q3: Identify your preferred listening styles and also explain why that style might be most effective for a particular communication occasion. Be specific with detailed context.***