

As the authors of this reading point out, most treatments of listening begin by arguing for the importance of good listening and then try to convince you that you're probably not an effective listener. But if you're studying listening, chances are you already know it's important and believe you could do it better. So rather than telling you what you already know, these authors begin their book on listening by discussing three misconceptions people commonly have about the listening process. Their idea is that it will be easier to improve your listening if you begin with an accurate rather than a distorted understanding of what's involved.

The first misconception is that listening is natural. The authors explain that hearing is the natural process, and that listening takes some thought, training, and effort. I've always believed that one of the most ironic things about listening is that, according to several surveys, we spend much more time listening than we spend reading, writing, or speaking, but we get almost no organized training in listening. So we are taught the least about the communication activity we engage in the most! Roach and Wyatt discuss this phenomenon.

The second misconception they discuss is the belief that listening is a passive act, a process of simply being open to what's available. This misconception exists primarily because we associate "work" with *visible* effort, and the effort you invest in listening is sometimes not very visible. But every person who listens for a living—therapist, lawyer, doctor, accountant, business consultant—has personally experienced the crushing fatigue that can come from working hard at listening.

The third misconception is that "I'm a good listener when I try." Some early listening research indicated that the average white-collar worker remembers about 25 percent of what he or she hears. So most of us start with a pretty low efficiency rate. Raw effort can improve that number, but not very permanently. It's most effective to get some listening training aimed at both attitudes and skills and then to practice what you learn long enough to make it habitual.

My primary purpose for including this brief reading is to set up the more developed articles that follow. If you're well informed about misconceptions, you'll be prepared to take on some new understandings and skills.

Listening and the Rhetorical Process

**Carol A. Roach and
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Most texts on listening begin by establishing that listening skills are important to you in school, on the job, and in your personal relationships. Then they go on to

convince you that you're not a very good listener. While these two observations may be true, we believe that you already know you could benefit by improving your listening skills or you wouldn't be taking this course. We will not, therefore, bore you by telling you what you already know. Instead, we will introduce you to some common misconceptions about listening and refute those misconceptions. . . .

Misconception Number One: Listening Is Natural

The misconception that listening is natural arises partly because we confuse the process of listening with the process of hearing. Hearing is certainly a natural process. Unless you have organic damage to some part of your ear, you will have been hearing since before you were born. Hearing is a matter of perception of small changes in atmospheric pressure, which goes on continuously, even when you are sleeping. How else would the alarm wake you in the morning? . . .

Humans can "hear" changes in air pressure in an effective range of frequencies from 20 to 20,000 cycles per second. Changes in air pressure impact the eardrum and are transmitted through the middle ear to the inner ear, where they are transformed into electrochemical messages and sent to the hearing center in the brain. That process is natural and automatic and outside conscious control. Problems start when we confuse this purely automatic physical process with the consciously purposeful psychological process of listening.

Listening is largely a process of discriminating and identifying which sounds are meaningful or important to us and which aren't. We actually focus our hearing in the same way we focus our sight. You can probably remember a time when you didn't "see" something that was in plain sight. Maybe you even fell over it. You have probably also had the experience of talking to someone—a parent, a teacher, a colleague, even a friend—who was thinking about something else and didn't "hear" what you said. In fact, they did hear in the sense that the sounds reached their ears, but they didn't hear what you said because they were paying attention to something else at the time. If you're sufficiently candid, you may also remember some times when you didn't hear something that was said to you because you weren't paying attention. We are all guilty of thinking about other things sometimes. The point is, you did hear, but you weren't listening.

"Excuse me, Dr. Simpson, I'm having trouble thinking of a good attention getter for my speech."

"What's your topic?"

"I'm talking about Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge, all that killing."

"In that case why don't you use the technique I just illustrated in class, the one from the acid rain speech?"

"I didn't hear that one. I guess I wasn't listening."

The importance of distinguishing between hearing and listening is that we don't need training to hear well, but we do need training to listen well. In fact, if the hearing mechanism is damaged, no amount of training will improve its function. Real deafness can't be cured by trying harder. Faulty listening, on the other hand, can't be cured by medical science or by magic. To learn to listen more effectively, you have to try harder. You have to learn how to listen.

The idea that we learn to listen as children is partially true. Before they start to school, children learn many things by listening. But they only learn as well as they were trained. Unfortunately most of the training children receive in listening skills comes largely in the form of injunctions. "Now, you listen to me!" they are told, or "Listen carefully!" The usefulness of such training can be illustrated by comparing it to a similar injunction to a child to "Catch the ball!" Not very useful advice. It's more useful to show children how to hold their hands and tell them to keep their eyes on the ball. Then give them plenty of supervised practice and explain to them what they are doing right and what they're doing wrong, so they can improve. Without supervised practice, children can pick up bad habits of listening which serve them indifferently as they grow up. Learning to listen is a matter of training; it doesn't come naturally any more than playing ball does.

In one very interesting study, Nichols and Stevens (1957) found evidence that younger children listen better than older children. When the researchers stopped teachers in the middle of lectures and asked the students what the teachers were talking about, they found that 90 percent of the first graders could answer correctly, 80 percent of the second graders could answer correctly, but only 28 percent of the senior high school students could answer correctly. These results might even lead us to believe that we become worse listeners as we grow up. Far from being a natural process, listening is clearly a consciously purposive activity for which we need systematic training and supervision to learn to do well.

Another way to look at listening is as one part of the communication process, like speaking. While we could agree that speaking is a natural human function, no one could deny that children have to be taught how to speak. Certainly no one was born speaking standard English. If you have forgotten the process of learning to speak, spend a couple of hours in a supermarket listening to mothers talk to toddlers as they shop. You will hear careful and constant instruction, reiteration, correction, and reinforcement of correct language patterns and usage. Or, if you have studied a second language, remember how much time you had to spend memorizing, listening, and practicing to become fluent.

Listening and speaking are both consciously purposive activities for which we need training to do well. The idea that some people are born listeners or born speakers is a fiction. It's a copout for people who don't want to try harder.

Misconception Number Two: Listening Is Passive

One of the most common misconceptions we have in our American way of life is the idea that work is always active. We seem to think that if we don't "see" something happening, work is not being done. So thinking is not often defined as work. Children are encouraged to "do something"—join the Little League, scouts, clubs. They are enrolled in camps, dancing lessons, junior business associations, and extracurricular activities. Students are encouraged to "get involved"—join the students' government, join a club or fraternity or association, contribute time to charities, and attend social events. Time spent "doing nothing" is assumed to be time wasted. In businesses and corporations people spend much of their working day going to meetings, having lunch, traveling, doing anything to look busy. Employees learn very quickly how to "look busy" when the boss comes around, even though no specific action is

required at the moment. Also, scholars, whose business is thinking, have to list specific activities to their administrators to prove they really are working. In our culture, movement is equated with work.

This American orientation toward a definition of work with visible activity leads us to view listening as passive. After all, you can't see anyone listening, so they must not be "doing" anything. What we have done instead is to define the visible signs of listening as the activity itself. You will understand this statement if you think back to when you were in high school. Think about the most boring class you had in high school. You didn't want to be caught daydreaming, so what did you do! You perfected the "student's stare." You put your chin in your hand, opened your eyes real wide, and nodded periodically as though you were agreeing with what was being said. If you were clever, you remembered to throw in a frown once in a while to show you were trying to understand something particularly difficult. You smiled occasionally to show you were glad to have something so interesting to listen to in school. Meanwhile your mind went on vacation. It worked perfectly. You had learned that activity equates with work.

When I began teaching I learned very quickly that I couldn't tell by looking who was listening and who wasn't. I had one student who always sat in the back, tilted his chair against the wall, and seemed to go to sleep. Finally one day I got fed up and challenged him. I told him that if he only meant to sleep, he could do it at home on his own time. He sat up, pushed his hat back, and recited to me the last ten minutes of my lecture. Boy, was I embarrassed.

One consequence of defining listening by its visible signs is to deny the active nature of real listening. When you are listening, your mind is extremely busy receiving and sorting out new ideas and relating them to what you already know and making new connections with old information. Real listening involves taking in new information and checking it against what you already know, selecting important ideas from unimportant ideas, searching for categories to store the information in (or creating new categories), and predicting what's coming next in order to be ready for it. The explanation of hearing and listening in the next chapter will help to make the active nature of listening clearer. When you're listening, your brain is busy actively reconstructing what the speaker is saying into meaningful units in terms of your own experience. But all this activity takes place in your brain; none of it necessarily shows itself outwardly. So it often looks like nothing is being done.

One of the things I found most frustrating about working in a group was that no one ever seemed to be listening to me. It was like I was always talking to myself. But then when it came time to prepare the final report, I discovered that the other group members knew a lot of the things I had been talking about. I was surprised to find out they had been listening after all. Especially John. I had thought he was a total deadhead.

Misconception Number Three: I'm a Good Listener When I Try

Most people vastly overestimate their own listening skills. One clever educator illustrates this to people who take his workshop on listening skills by having each person introduce herself to the class. Then he asks each of them to name the person who is sitting to her left. Most people can't do it.

If you ask most people what their listening efficiency is, they will tell you that they remember about 75 to 80 percent of what they hear. Most people think they are good listeners. Research findings directly contradict this perception. The research finding most often cited to illustrate this poor listening efficiency comes from the work of Nichols (1957) who found that the average white-collar worker demonstrates only about 25 percent listening efficiency. This means that the average person only remembers about one-quarter of what he or she hears. Both these percentages are in comparison to the ideal of 100 percent recall, a feat only accomplished by fictional detectives and a few unusual persons who have perfect auditory recall (like some people have photographic memories).

The real test of listening skills is, of course, not what you can do on a listening test, but how well you understand and remember the things you have to understand and remember to get along in your daily life. When the television news broadcast is over, how much of what you heard do you remember? Can you pick out the main points when someone is giving a speech? Can you understand and remember oral instructions? How good are you at discovering people's feelings when they are talking to you? Can you distinguish between a genuinely good business deal and a scam? Can you pick out the arguments and evidence in a political speech? Can you pick out the different instruments in a band or identify the theme of a symphony? All these tasks are related to your ability to listen effectively, and skill at these tasks is important to your welfare. But most people are only partially successful at any of these tasks.

The fact is that most of us would like to think we are better listeners (more intelligent, more sensitive, more beautiful) than we really are. Listening is hard work, and we don't apply ourselves to the task unless there is a clear payoff. But unless we practice and sharpen our listening skills and develop good listening habits, it may be too late when opportunity knocks. When you're in the middle of a business deal or in the middle of a physics lecture is not the time to start practicing listening skills.

References and Recommended Reading

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Review Questions

1. What are the primary differences between hearing and listening?
2. What kind of listening training do we typically get as young children?