

Are You Listening?

Phyllis Kemp Worden

Most of us spend about 45 per cent of our time listening. To be effective communicators, we must be effective listeners. We remember only half of what we hear immediately after listening. We can learn by listening; it gives us time to think; it can help solve problems; it can help us make better decisions and give us self-confidence; it can help us persuade others. With conscious practice of good listening habits, the time we spend listening can be productive and creative.

Do you realize it's now possible for the human voice to reach the ear of a listener anywhere in the world in a fraction of a second?¹ However, hearing a voice doesn't mean you're listening or understanding that voice. As you listen, you accumulate sounds bit by bit, identify short sound sequences as words or phrases, and then translate these sequences into meaning. If you don't receive the message and properly decode it, the communication process breaks down. Effective communication requires the interaction of two or more people.

To be an effective communicator, you must be an effective listener. Physiological studies indicate that when you're really listening, your heart beats faster and your

blood circulates more quickly. In some cases body temperature may rise slightly.²

Listening Is Important

Listening is important in everyday communication. Rankin,³ in early listening research, found that Americans spend about 30 per cent of the time they devote to language each day in speaking, 16 per cent in reading, 9 per cent in writing, and 45 per cent in listening. Today, listening plays even a greater part because of the emphasis on mass communication via radio, television, and recordings.

Consider the amount of time you devote each day to listening. You listen to people who come into

PHYLLIS KEMP WORDEN was formerly the Assistant to the State Leader of Home Economics, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

the office with a problem. You listen to questions, complaints, and comments over the telephone. You listen to questions asked by meeting participants or other professionals. You listen to your secretary as she conveys important messages or directions. You listen to co-workers or friends.

In addition to listening for information or facts, listening can help you personally. Haney⁴ says there is evidence that sensitive listening can be an effective tool in changing a person's personality. He suggests that listening often changes personal attitudes towards yourself and others, and you may even look at life differently. People who have been listened to in a sincere way often become more mature, more democratic, more open to personal experiences, and less defensive and authoritarian. Listening is a growth experience in many ways.⁵

What Is Listening?

Listening is often discussed on three levels—hearing, listening, and auding.⁶ The lowest level is hearing. In *hearing* you comprehend the spoken word, but do not react to it. You may often “half-listen” or just barely follow the train of thought. Hearing is when speech in the form of sound waves is received and modified by the listener's ear—you realize your secretary is talking to you, but you're too busy with other things to listen to her.

Listening, the second level, is paying attention in more detail. It is

becoming more aware of sound sequences, but with very little response—you watch your co-worker as he speaks, but you don't give any visual clues such as a smile or a nod to indicate you're really hearing him.

Auding, the highest level of listening, is when you listen most attentively and form associations with related items from your background or experience. Auding involves one or more avenues of thought—indexing, comparing, noting meaningful sequences, and forming sensory impressions. It may include an auditory response in agreement or disagreement. Auding is critical, appreciative, and creative listening.

Are You Listening?

Are you guilty of assuming you know how to listen? Reading, writing, and speaking are learned and practiced at home and in school, but very little instruction is given in the art of listening. Research has shown that you can improve listening comprehension at least 25 per cent by improving poor listening habits you've developed over the years.⁷

The listener controls most of the information a speaker will share. You can easily encourage him to share information by looking at him, smiling, nodding, and giving your undivided attention. Paying attention and looking at the speaker is not just a courtesy; it's the best way to really hear what he has to say. On the other hand, you can cut short a communication by lifting an

eyebrow, yawning, or by looking beyond or away from the speaker.

Do you take advantage of the thought/speech speed ratio, or does your mind wander while the speaker is talking? The average American speaks about 125-150 words per minute. The brain, however, is able to receive and decode messages much quicker—about 500 words per minute. Possibly your mind wanders during this time lapse. Did I lock the car door? Did I mail that letter? Where did I leave that report? Let's see, I'll need a projector, screen, extension cord, paper Avoid thinking about other things when listening. If your mind wanders, force yourself to make it short so you won't miss an important thought, fact, or idea.

How well do you remember things you've heard? Nichols,⁸ after conducting listening research on students at the University of Minnesota, concludes that the average person remembers only half of what he has heard immediately after listening to someone, *no matter how carefully he thought he had listened*. Two months afterward he remembers only 25 per cent. Nichols also found that 95 out of 100 males are better listeners than females and that students who come from farm families are the best listeners.⁹

Physical or psychological discomforts or disturbances may lure your mind away from the speaker. A monotonous, droaning, or unpleasant voice may deter your listening by creating auditory fatigue or temporary hearing loss. Listening

is often hindered by noise or distraction inside or outside the room or building; by glaring or depressing color schemes, poor ventilation, inadequate lighting systems, or offensive odors.

In one study, college students listed over 170 different deterrents to listening.¹⁰ Some common ones are words with emotional overtones such as divorce, taxes, death, Communism, Vietnam, civil rights, poverty. Other common words suggested as deterrents to listening include computerize, fellow-traveler, square, mother-in-law, mod, cool, beat, hippie, black power.¹¹ As an extension worker, you may have a deaf spot to such words as program planning, resource development, budget, low-income, monthly report.

Improve Listening Habits

It's possible to develop good listening habits. According to Nichols and Stevens¹² you can become a better listener by developing your ability to concentrate on what is being said. For example, for one minute of every hour try to give your fullest listening attention to a person talking, even if it's a four-year-old. If there's no one available, pick a sound such as an airplane, a bird's song, or a humming machine. Then put everything else out of your mind and concentrate on that sound. Such concentration is harder than you think, but it should greatly improve your listening proficiency. Practice won't make you a perfect listener, but it can make you a more

effective listener. It will pay off in better communication, closer friendships, increased efficiency, and perhaps a salary increase.

The following ideas might help improve your listening habits:

- *Improve conditions that affect your hearing:* Provide an adequate room or listening environment; remove physical and mental distractions; provide adequate lighting.
- *Create a climate for listening:* Prepare yourself the best you can for listening. Remember listening is hard work. Show your speaker you're listening by using proper responses.
- *Practice sincere concentrated listening:* If during a speech you take notes, jot down only key words or phrases so you don't miss some important points or ideas the speaker is making. Put away papers, knitting, and other items that distract you or your neighbors.
- *Take advantage of the thought/speech speed ratio:* Make associations, but don't let your mind wander. Listen for key points and ideas. Facts, statistics, and examples are important, but are *not* usually the speaker's main points.
- *Don't judge the speaker too quickly:* React to the speaker's ideas not to him as a person. Listen with a purpose and concentrate on what he's saying. Don't assume he's using the words the same way you might use them.
- *Recognize that you can improve your listening skills:* Practice

won't make perfect, but it will help you. If you don't understand a comment, ask for clarification rather than skipping over it.

- *Empathize with the speaker:* It may help to put yourself in his place. You appreciate a good listener, so let him appreciate your skills as a good listener.
- *Listen to how the speaker says it:* You may be concentrating so hard you miss the importance of speaker's emotional reactions and attitudes to what he has said. How he says it may change the meaning.

Footnotes

1. Thomas Weaver, Gladys Borchers, and Donald Smith, *Speaking and Listening* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1956), p. 8.
2. Henrietta Fleck, "The Challenge of Listening," *Forecast for Home Economists*, XII (February, 1967), 41.
3. Paul T. Rankin, "The Importance of Listening Ability," *English Journal*, XVII (October, 1928), 623.
4. William Haney, *Communication and Organizational Behavior* (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1967), p. 83.
5. For a good discussion of how listening can be a vital experience for man, see John Kord Lage-mann, "Hearing Is a Way of Touching," *Reader's Digest* (August, 1969), pp. 107-10.
6. David Russell and Elizabeth F. Russell, *Listening Aids Through the Grades* (New York, New

- York: Columbia University Press, 1959); and Sanford Taylor, "Listening—What Research Says to the Teacher," *American Education Research Association Bulletin* #29 (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, April, 1964), p. 6.
7. Harold Zelko, "An Outline of the Role of Listening in Communication," *Journal of Communication*, IV (Fall, 1954), 73.
 8. Ralph Nichols, *Are You Listening?* (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1957), pp. 5-6.
 9. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
 10. "Learn the Useful Art of Listening," *Changing Times* (December, 1967), pp. 40-42.
 11. Nichols, *Are You Listening?*, p. 77.
 12. See article by Ralph Nichols and Leonard Stephens, "You Don't Know How to Listen," *Colliers*, CXXXII (July 25, 1953), 16-19.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code)

1. Title of publication: JOURNAL OF EXTENSION (formerly JOURNAL OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION)
2. Frequency of publication: Quarterly (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter)
3. Location of known office of publication, headquarters, and general business office: 216 Agricultural Hall, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.
4. Name and address of publisher and owner: Extension Journal, Inc., 216 Agricultural Hall, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.
5. Name and address of editor: Jerold W. Apps, 216 Agricultural Hall, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.
6. Bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders: none.
7. The following circulation figures are provided for (a) the average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months and (b) the single issue nearest to filing date:

Total number copies printed	(a) 9000 (b) 9000
Circulation:	
Sales through dealers, carriers	(a) none (b) none
Mail subscriptions	(a) 7209 (b) 6954
Total paid circulation	(a) 7209 (b) 6954
Free distribution	(a) 56 (b) 81
Total distribution	(a) 7265 (b) 7035
Office use, left-over, and inventory balance, etc.	(a) 1735 (b) 1965
Total	(a) 9000 (b) 9000

I certify that the statements made above are correct and complete.

(Signed) Jerold W. Apps, September 26, 1969, *Editor*