Chapter 4:
Listening

Understanding How and Why We Listen

In our sender-oriented society, listening is often overlooked as an important part of the communication process. Yet research shows that *adults spend about 45 percent of their time listening, which is more than any other communicative activity*. In some contexts, we spend even more time listening than that. On average, workers spend 55 percent of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63 percent of their day listening.

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, which can help us meet instrumental needs as we learn things that helps us complete certain tasks at work or school and get things done in general. The act of listening to our relational partners provides support, which is an important part of relational maintenance and helps us meet our relational needs. Listening to what others say about us helps us develop an accurate self-concept, which can help us more strategically communicate for identity needs in order to project to others our desired self. Overall, improving our listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practice our own forms of expression. In this section, we will learn more about each stage of the listening process, the main types of listening, and the main listening styles.

The Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Models of processes are informative in that they help us visualize specific components, but keep in mind that they do not capture the speed, overlapping nature, or overall complexity of the actual process in action. The stages of the listening process are receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.

Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the *receiving* stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. This part of the listening process is more physiological than other parts, which include cognitive and relational elements. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in e-mail, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.

The unit on perception discusses some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Recall that salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context and that we tend to find salient things that are visually or audibly stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find very interesting.

It is important to consider noise as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. Environmental noise such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Psychological noise like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The *interpreting* stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. Through the process of comparing new information with old information, we may also update or revise particular schemata if we find the new information relevant and credible. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it. I remember earning perfect scores on exams in my anatomy class in college because I was able to memorize and recall, for example, all the organs in the digestive system. In fact, I might still be able to do that now over a decade later. But neither then nor now could I tell you the significance or function of most of those organs, meaning I didn't really get to a level of understanding but simply stored the information for later recall.

Recalling

Our ability to *recall* information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day. Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory.

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large

amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds. This initial memory storage unit doesn't provide much use for our study of communication, as these large but quickly expiring chunks of sensory data are primarily used in reactionary and instinctual ways.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. Short-term memory is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. Long-term memory is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to an existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely. Working memory is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time. This is different from our typical memory function in that information usually has to make it to long-term memory before we can call it back up to apply to a current situation. People with good working memories are able to keep recent information in mind and process it and apply it to other incoming information. This can be very useful during high-stress situations. A person in control of a command center like the White House Situation Room should have a good working memory in order to take in, organize, evaluate, and then immediately use new information instead of having to wait for that information to make it to long-term memory and then be retrieved and used.

Although recall is an important part of the listening process, *there isn't a direct correlation between being good at recalling information and being a good listener*. Some people have excellent memories and recall abilities and can tell you a very accurate story from many years earlier during a situation in which they should actually be listening and not showing off their recall abilities. Recall is an important part of the listening process because it is most often used to assess listening abilities and effectiveness. Many quizzes and tests in school are based on recall and are often used to assess how well students comprehended information presented in class, which is seen as an indication of how well they listened. When recall is our only goal, we excel at it. Experiments have found that people can memorize and later recall a set of faces and names with near 100 percent recall when sitting in a quiet lab and asked to do so. But throw in external noise, more visual stimuli, and

multiple contextual influences, and we can't remember the name of the person we were just introduced to one minute earlier. Even in interpersonal encounters, we rely on recall to test whether or not someone was listening. Imagine that Azam is talking to his friend Belle, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Azam, annoyed that Belle keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Belle inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Azam replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

Evaluating

When we *evaluate* something, we make judgments about its *credibility*, *completeness*, and *worth*. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical thinking skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development.

Studying communication is a great way to build your critical thinking skills, because you learn much more about the taken-for-granted aspects of how communication works, which gives you tools to analyze and critique messages, senders, and contexts. Critical thinking and listening skills also help you take a more proactive role in the communication process rather than being a passive receiver of messages that may not be credible, complete, or worthwhile. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the speaker than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a speaker based on his or her identity or characteristics rather than on the content of his or her message. We will learn more about how to avoid slipping into a person-centered rather than message-centered evaluative stance later in the chapter.

Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Later, we will learn more specifics about how to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal cues sent during the responding stage, but we all know from experience some signs that indicate whether a person is paying attention and understanding a message or not.

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is talking and after they are done. Back-channel cues are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like "uh-huh," "oh," and "right," and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren't listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.

Paraphrasing is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: "What I heard you say was…" or "It seems like you're saying…" You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: "It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?" Or you might ask a standalone question like "What did your boss do that made you think he was 'playing favorites?'" Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions once a person's turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

The Importance of Listening

Understanding how listening works provides the foundation we need to explore why we listen, including various types and styles of listening. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) that we learned about early in the course. Listening is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

In terms of *academics*, poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person's first year of college. In general, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Communication skills including listening are also highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys.

Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in *professional* contexts. Even though listening education is lacking in our society, research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating/persuading, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving. Training and improvements in listening will continue to pay off, as employers desire employees with good communication skills, and employees who have good listening skills are more likely to get promoted.

Listening also has implications for our *personal* lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives. Emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help relational partners manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate. The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts.

- to focus on messages sent by other people or noises coming from our surroundings;
- to better our understanding of other people's communication;
- to critically evaluate other people's messages;
- to monitor nonverbal signals;
- to indicate that we are interested or paying attention;
- to empathize with others and show we care for them (relational maintenance); and
- to engage in negotiation, dialogue, or other exchanges that result in a shared understanding of or agreement on an issue.

Listening Types

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different types of listening. The type of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then lead the other person to feel "heard" and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively. The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic.

Discriminative Listening

Discriminative listening is a focused and usually instrumental type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process. Here we engage in listening to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular auditory or visual stimuli. For example, we may focus our listening on a dark part of the yard while walking the dog at night to determine if the noise we just heard presents us with any danger. Or we may look for a particular nonverbal cue to let us know our conversational partner received our message.

In the absence of hearing impairment, we have an innate and physiological ability to engage in discriminative listening. Although this is the most basic form of listening, it provides the foundation on which more intentional listening skills are built. This type of listening can be refined and honed. Think of how musicians, singers, and mechanics exercise specialized discriminative listening to isolate specific aural stimuli and how actors,

detectives, and sculptors discriminate visual cues that allow them to analyze, make meaning from, or recreate nuanced behavior.

Informational Listening

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voice mail, and briefings at work. Since retention and recall are important components of informational listening, good concentration and memory skills are key. These also happen to be skills that many college students struggle with, at least in the first years of college, but will be expected to have mastered once they get into professional contexts. In many professional contexts, informational listening is important, especially when receiving instructions. I caution my students that they will be expected to process verbal instructions more frequently in their profession than they are in college. Most college professors provide detailed instructions and handouts with assignments so students can review them as needed, but many supervisors and managers will expect you to take the initiative to remember or record vital information. Additionally, many bosses are not as open to questions or requests to repeat themselves as professors are.

Critical Listening

Critical listening entails listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context. A critical listener evaluates a message and accepts it, rejects it, or decides to withhold judgment and seek more information. As constant consumers of messages, we need to be able to assess the credibility of speakers and their messages and identify various persuasive appeals and faulty logic (known as fallacies). Critical listening is important during persuasive exchanges, but I recommend always employing some degree of critical listening, because you may find yourself in a persuasive interaction that you thought was informative. As is noted in what we learned about nonverbal communication, people often disguise inferences as facts. Critical-listening skills are useful when listening to a persuasive speech in this class

and when processing any of the persuasive media messages we receive daily. You can see judges employ critical listening, with varying degrees of competence, on talent competition shows like Rupaul's Drag Race, America's Got Talent, and The Voice. While the exchanges between judges and contestants on these shows are expected to be subjective and critical, critical listening is also important when listening to speakers that have stated or implied objectivity, such as parents, teachers, political leaders, doctors, and religious leaders. We will learn more about how to improve your critical thinking skills later.

Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling. Empathetic listening is distinct from sympathetic listening. While the word empathy means to "feel into" or "feel with" another person, sympathy means to "feel for" someone. Sympathy is generally more self-oriented and distant than empathy.

Empathetic listening is other-oriented and should be genuine. Because of our own centrality in our perceptual world, empathetic listening can be difficult. It's often much easier for us to tell our own story or to give advice than it is to really listen to and empathize with someone else. We should keep in mind that sometimes others just need to be heard and our feedback isn't actually desired.

Empathetic listening is key for dialogue and helps maintain relationships. In order to reach dialogue, people must have a degree of open-mindedness and a commitment to civility that allows them to be empathetic while still allowing them to believe in and advocate for their own position. An excellent example of critical and empathetic listening in action is the international Truth and Reconciliation movement. The most well-known example of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) occurred in South Africa as a way to address the various conflicts that occurred during apartheid. The first TRC in the United States occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, as a means of processing the events and aftermath of November 3, 1979, when members of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed five members of the Communist Worker's Party during a daytime confrontation witnessed by news crews and many

bystanders. The goal of such commissions is to allow people to tell their stories, share their perspectives in an open environment, and be listened to.

The truth and reconciliation process seeks to heal relations between opposing sides by uncovering all pertinent facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and allowing for acknowledgement, appropriate public mourning, forgiveness, and healing, The focus often is on giving victims, witnesses, and even perpetrators a chance to publicly tell their stories without fear of prosecution.

Listening Styles

Just as there are different types of listening, there are also different styles of listening. People may be categorized as one or more of the following listeners: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style and that they choose a style based on the listening situation.

Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better. Following a brief overview of each listening style, we will explore some of their applications, strengths, and weaknesses.

- *People-oriented* listeners are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- *Action-oriented* listeners prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated with they perceive communication to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be "long-winded."
- *Content-oriented* listeners are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.
- *Time-oriented* listeners are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick

decisions (taking shortcuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as "supporters" who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as people who will "lend an ear." They may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but all people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in communication involving emotional exchanges, as a person-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged. People-oriented listeners are likely skilled empathetic listeners and may find success in supportive fields like counseling, social work, or nursing. Interestingly, such fields are typically feminized, in that people often associate the characteristics of people-oriented listeners with roles filled by women.

Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by disorganization because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners can be thought of as "builders"—like an engineer, a construction site foreperson, or a skilled project manager. This style of listening can be very effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented style of listening in instructional contexts. In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listeners may not actually be very interested in listening, instead of taking a "What do you want me to do?" approach.

A friend and colleague of mine who exhibits some qualities of an action-oriented listener once told me about an encounter she had with a close friend who had a stillborn baby. My friend said she immediately went into "action mode." Although it was difficult for her to connect with her friend at an

emotional/empathetic level, she was able to use her action-oriented approach to help out in other ways as she helped make funeral arrangements, coordinated with other family and friends, and handled the details that accompanied this tragic emotional experience. As you can see from this example, the action-oriented listening style often contrasts with the people-oriented listening style.

Content-Oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as "learners," and they also ask questions to solicit more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with information. Content-oriented listeners are likely skilled informational and critical listeners and may find success in academic careers in the humanities, social sciences, or sciences. Ideally, judges and politicians would also possess these characteristics.

Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners can be thought of as "executives," and they tend to actually verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating.

For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just entered his office and asked to talk: "Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes." These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate time and/or attention shortages, such as looking at a clock, avoiding eye contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs. People often get action-oriented and time-oriented listeners confused. Action-oriented listeners would be happy to get to a conclusion or decision quickly if they perceive that they are acting on well-organized and accurate information. They would, however, not mind taking longer to reach a

conclusion when dealing with a complex topic, and they would delay making a decision if the information presented to them didn't meet their standards of organization. Unlike time-oriented listeners, action-oriented listeners are not as likely to cut people off (especially if people present relevant information) and are not as likely to take shortcuts.

Barriers to Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process. At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluating stage, personal biases and prejudices can lead us to block people out or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding. In the following section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

Environmental and Physical Barriers

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. You may recall from our unit on nonverbal communication, group members are allowed to choose a leader often choose the person who is sitting at the center or head of the table. Even though the person may not have demonstrated any leadership abilities, people subconsciously gravitate toward speakers that are nonverbally accessible. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. As we learned early in the course, environmental noises

such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Physiological noise, like environmental noise, can interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a *physical* barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Physiological noise is noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress. Ailments such as a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or a poison ivy outbreak can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity. Another type of noise, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. *Psychological noise*, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and levels of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Excited arousal can also distract as much as anxious arousal. Stress about upcoming events ranging from losing a job to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. While we will explore cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, *psychological noise* is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Additionally, mental anxiety (psychological noise) can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in rashes (physiological noise).

Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Aside from the barriers to effective listening that may be present in the environment or emanate from our bodies, cognitive limits, a lack of listening preparation, difficult or disorganized messages, and prejudices can interfere with listening. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of ten televisions, you

may notice that in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers some advantages and disadvantages. But unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

Difference Between Speech and Thought Rate

Our ability to process more information than what comes from one speaker or source creates a barrier to effective listening. *While people speak at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute, we can process between 400 and 800 words per minute*.

This gap between speech rate and thought rate gives us an opportunity to side-process any number of thoughts that can be distracting from a more important message. Because of this gap, it is impossible to give one message our "undivided attention," but we can occupy other channels in our minds with thoughts related to the central message. For example, using some of your extra cognitive processing abilities to repeat, rephrase, or reorganize messages coming from one source allows you to use that extra capacity in a way that reinforces the primary message.

The difference between speech and thought rate connects to personal barriers to listening, as personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts that can take us away from listening and challenge our ability to concentrate on others' messages. Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation. For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we're sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out. So the student who is checking his or her Twitter feed during class may suddenly switch his

or her attention back to the previously ignored professor when the following words are spoken: "This will be important for the exam."

Another common barrier to effective listening that stems from the speech and thought rate divide is response preparation. *Response preparation* refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker's turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn't had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

Lack of Listening Preparation

Another barrier to effective listening is a general lack of *listening preparation*. Unfortunately, most people have never received any formal training or instruction related to listening. Although some people think listening skills just develop over time, competent listening is difficult, and enhancing listening skills takes a concerted effort. Even when listening education is available, people do not embrace it as readily as they do opportunities to enhance their speaking skills. After teaching communication courses for several years, I have consistently found that students and teachers approach the listening part of the course less enthusiastically than some of the other parts. *Listening is often viewed as an annoyance or a chore or just ignored or minimized as part of the communication process*. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening, as it's the speakers who are sometimes literally in the spotlight. Although listening competence is a crucial part of social interaction and many of us value others we perceive to be "good listeners," listening just doesn't get the same kind of praise, attention, instruction, or credibility as speaking. Teachers, parents, and relational partners explicitly convey the importance of listening through statements like "You better listen to me," "Listen closely," and "Listen up," but these demands are rarely paired with concrete instruction. So unless you plan on taking more communication courses in the future (and I hope you do), this chapter may be the only instruction you receive on the basics of the

listening process, some barriers to effective listening, and how we can increase our listening competence.

Bad Listening Practices

The previously discussed barriers to effective listening may be difficult to overcome because they are at least partially beyond our control. Physical barriers, cognitive limitations, and perceptual biases exist within all of us, and it is more realistic to believe that we can become more conscious of and lessen them than it is to believe that we can eliminate them altogether. Other "bad listening" practices may be habitual, but they are easier to address with some concerted effort. These bad listening practices include interrupting, distorted listening, eavesdropping, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, and pseudo-listening.

Interrupting

Conversations unfold as a series of turns, and turn-taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn-taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other's toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is an *interruption*, but not all interruptions are considered "bad listening." An interruption could be unintentional if we misread cues and think a person is done speaking only to have him or her start up again at the same time we do. Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., "I think so too.") or excitement about the conversation (e.g., "That's so cool!"). Back-channel cues like "uh-huh," as we learned earlier, also overlap with a speaker's message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we're engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., "Turn left here."), instructions (e.g., "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (e.g., "Look out behind you!"). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered bad listening if they result from mindless communication. As we've already learned, *the intended meaning is not as important as the meaning that is generated in the*

interaction itself. So if you interrupt unintentionally, but because you were only half-listening, then the interruption is still evidence of bad listening. The speaker may form a negative impression of you that can't just be erased by you noting that you didn't "mean to interrupt." Interruptions can also be used as an attempt to dominate a conversation. A person engaging in this type of interruption may lead the other communicator to try to assert dominance, too, resulting in a competition to see who can hold the floor the longest or the most often. More than likely, though, the speaker will form a negative impression of the interrupter and may withdraw from the conversation.

Distorted Listening

Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively little negative effects if we are casually recounting a story, annoying effects if we forget the order of turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or very negative effects if we recount the events of a crime out of order, which leads to faulty testimony at a criminal trial. Rationalization is another form of distorted listening through which we adapt, edit, or skew incoming information to fit our existing schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he earned a "D" on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from "I didn't follow the paper guidelines" to "this professor is an unfair grader." Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context. Passing along distorted information can lead to negative consequences ranging from starting a false rumor about someone to passing along incorrect medical instructions from one health-care provider to the next. Last, the addition of material to a message is a type of distorted listening that actually goes against our normal pattern of listening, which involves reducing the amount of information and losing some meaning as we take it in. The metaphor of "weaving a tall tale" is related to the practice of distorting through addition, as inaccurate or fabricated information is added to what was actually heard.

Eavesdropping

Eavesdropping is a bad listening practice that involves a calculated and planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation. There is a difference between eavesdropping on and overhearing a conversation. Many if not most of the interactions we have throughout the day occur in the presence of other people. However, given that our perceptual fields are usually focused on the interaction, we are often unaware of the other people around us or don't think about the fact that they could be listening in on our conversation. We usually only become aware of the fact that other people could be listening in when we're discussing something private.

People eavesdrop for a variety of reasons. People might think another person is talking about them behind their back or that someone is engaged in illegal or unethical behavior. Sometimes people eavesdrop to feed the gossip mill or out of curiosity. In any case, this type of listening is considered bad because it is a *violation of people's privacy*. Consequences for eavesdropping may include an angry reaction if caught, damage to relationships, or being perceived as dishonest and sneaky. Additionally, eavesdropping may lead people to find out information that is personally upsetting or hurtful, especially if the point of eavesdropping is to find out what people are saying behind their backs.

Aggressive Listening

Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says. Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built-up frustration within a relationship. Unfortunately, the more two people know each other, the better they will be at aggressive listening. Take the following exchange between long-term partners:

Deb: I've been thinking about making a salsa garden next to the side porch. I think it would be really good to be able to go pick our own tomatoes and peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa.
Summer: Really? When are you thinking about doing it?
Deb: Next weekend. Would you like to help?

Summer: I won't hold my breath. Every time you come up with some "idea of the week" you get so excited about it. But do you ever follow through with it? No. We'll be eating salsa from the store next year, just like we are now.

Although Summer's initial response to Deb's idea is seemingly appropriate and positive, she asks the question because she has already planned her upcoming aggressive response. Summer's aggression toward Deb isn't about a salsa garden; it's about a building frustration with what Summer perceives as Deb's lack of follow-through on her ideas. Aside from engaging in aggressive listening because of built-up frustration, such listeners may also attack others' ideas or mock their feelings because of their own low self-esteem and insecurities.

Narcissistic Listening

Narcissistic listening is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them. Narcissistic listeners redirect the focus of the conversation to them by interrupting or changing the topic. When the focus is taken off them, narcissistic listeners may give negative feedback by pouting, providing negative criticism of the speaker or topic, or ignoring the speaker. A common sign of narcissistic listening is the combination of a "pivot," when listeners shift the focus of attention back to them, and "one-upping," when listeners try to top what previous speakers have said during the interaction. You can see this narcissistic combination in the following interaction:

Bryce: My boss has been really unfair to me lately and hasn't been letting me work around my class schedule. I think I may have to quit, but I don't know where I'll find another job.
Toby: Why are you complaining? I've been working with the same stupid boss for two years. He doesn't even care that I'm trying to get my degree and work at the same time. And you should hear the way he talks to me in front of the other employees.

Narcissistic listeners, given their self-centeredness, may actually fool themselves into thinking that they are listening and actively contributing to a conversation. We all have the urge to share our own stories during interactions because other people's communication triggers our own

memories about related experiences. It is generally more competent to withhold sharing our stories until the other person has been able to speak and we have given the appropriate support and response. But we all shift the focus of a conversation back to us occasionally, either because we don't know another way to respond or because we are making an attempt at empathy. Narcissistic listeners consistently interrupt or follow another speaker with statements like "That reminds me of the time…," "Well, if I were you…," and "That's nothing…" As we'll learn later, matching stories aren't considered empathetic listening, but occasionally doing it doesn't make you a narcissistic listener.

Pseudo-listening

Do you have a friend or family member who repeats stories? If so, then you've probably engaged in *pseudo-listening* as a politeness strategy. Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not. Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. She or he is not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs someone to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo-listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should definitely avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being "found out," which could have negative relational consequences.

Improving Listening Competency: Active Listening

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will learn strategies for

developing and improving competence at each stage of the listening process. We will also define active listening and the behaviors that go along with it. Looking back to the types of listening discussed earlier, we will learn specific strategies for sharpening our critical and empathetic listening skills. In keeping with our focus on integrative learning, we will also apply the skills we have learned in academic, professional, and relational contexts and explore how culture and gender affect listening.

Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening that we discussed earlier. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

Active Listening Can Help Overcome Barriers to Effective Listening

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take when. And student options are increasing, as some colleges are offering classes in the overnight hours to accommodate working students and students who are just "night owls." Of course, we don't always have control over our schedule, in which case we will need to utilize other effective listening strategies that we will learn more about later in this chapter.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me / affect my life?"
3. "What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?"

As we learned earlier, the difference between speech and thought processing rate means listeners' level of attention varies while receiving a message. Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades. One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're saying clear and offering well-organized messages that are tailored for our listeners. We will learn much more about establishing relevance, organizing a message, and gaining the attention of an audience in public speaking contexts later in the book.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning; explanations and examples of each follow:

- *Covert coaching* involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as "You're getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now."
- *Self-reinforcement* involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: "You're being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam."
- *Covert questioning* involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: "What is

the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?" "Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbors?"

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. I suggest that students occupy the "extra" channels in their mind with thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can use those channels to resort, rephrase, and repeat what a speaker says. When we resort, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we rephrase, we can put messages into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we repeat, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

Other tools can help with concentration and memory. *Mental bracketing* refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening. This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren't related to a speaker's message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention. Mnemonic devices are techniques that can aid in information recall. Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on the information. Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization, and examples of each follow:

- **Acronyms.** HOMES—to help remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Rhyme.** "Righty tighty, lefty loosey"—to remember which way most light bulbs, screws, and other coupling devices turn to make them go in or out.
- **Visualization.** Imagine seeing a glass of port wine (which is red) and the red navigation light on a boat to help remember that the red light on a boat is always on the port side, which will also help you remember that the blue light must be on the starboard side.

Active Listening Behaviors

From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to

help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviors as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener's eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, "That's new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it." We already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening. An occasional head nod and "uh-huh" signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of "autopilot" listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker's current thoughts before starting a conversational turn. Being able to *summarize* what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also *ask questions that seek clarification* and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your nonverbal feedback can be useful for a speaker, as it signals that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don't let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as a listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn. Research shows that people with higher social status are

more likely to interrupt others, so keep this in mind and be prepared for it if you are speaking to a high-status person, or try to resist it if you are the high-status person in an interaction.

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn't always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn't normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don't think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker. I actually invite students to take notes during informal meetings because I think they sometimes don't think about it or don't think it's appropriate. But many people would rather someone jot down notes instead of having to respond to follow-up questions on information that was already clearly conveyed. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like "Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important."

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods; verbal back-channel cues such as "OK," "mmhum," or "oh"; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting.