

Lesson 6.1 Process and Barriers to Listening Well

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 and styles of listening, as well as some of the barriers that keep us from carefully listening to each other.



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*.

1. 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 the 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.

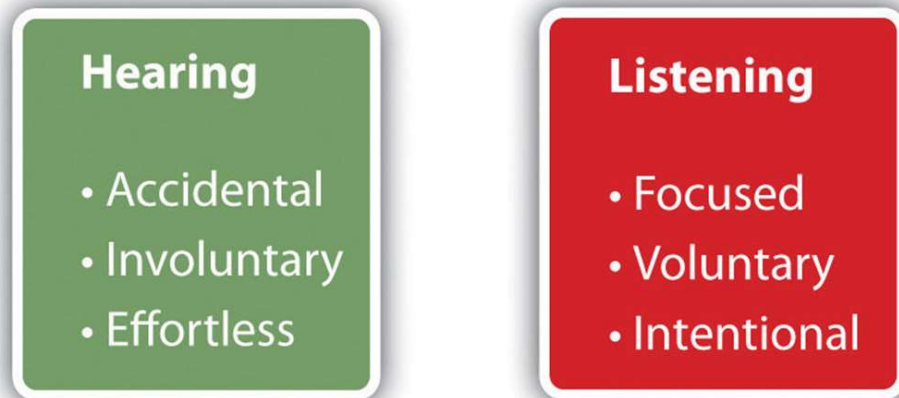


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Our unit on perception discussed some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various 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 interfere with listening, which is the cognitive process of managing or focusing the stimuli taken in during hearing.



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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.

2. 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. For example, you may remember earning perfect scores on an exam in a past class because you were able to memorize and recall important material, but were you able to explain the significance of that memorized information, and can you now explain what it was you learned in that particular class? Did you understand what you learned or simply store it for possible use later on?



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3. 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. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 189–99.

Our memory consists of multiple “storage units,” including *sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory*. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 184.

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. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 184

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 the 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.



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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 Marco is talking to his friend Dee, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Marco, annoyed that Dee keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Dee inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Marco replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

4. 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.

5. 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.



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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 has finished talking 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.

Understanding how listening works provide the foundation we need to explore why we listen and why sometimes we find it so very difficult to listen. Although listening helps us achieve our communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) and will also help us succeed academically, professionally, and within personal contexts, we've got to admit there are times that real barriers inhibit our ability to listen effectively. Let's take a look at some of them.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 200.

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.

Let's now explore how *environmental and physical factors*, *cognitive and personal factors*, and *poor listening habits* present barriers to effective listening.

Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening


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. Yet, 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.

Just like environmental noise, *physiological 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 bodies. 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 level 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.

It is also shown that the simple presence of a cell phone during any type of communication will impact listening readiness. Just the fact that the device is sitting out and available for possible use can psychologically distract communicators and disrupt the flow of the conversation. Researchers describe that a couple involved in a casual (impersonal) conversation with little value or meaning noticed no negative effect on their listening experience. However, pairs who were involved in a more intense and meaningful (interpersonal) conversation reported an interruption in the quality of the communication. Couples "reported feeling less trust and thought that their partners showed less empathy if there was a cell phone present."

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-your-cell-phone-hurts-your-relationships/>  [\(https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-your-cell-phone-hurts-your-relationships/\)](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-your-cell-phone-hurts-your-relationships/) (We'll focus more attention on the role empathy plays in listening and emotional intelligence later in this unit.)



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Psychological noise is also 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.

Rapid Thought Speed- 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. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 195.



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 reason why the difference between speech and thought rate can be seen as a personal barrier to listening is due to the fact that our personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts, and this is what takes us away from listening. Being more involved in our personal concerns challenges us to concentrate on others’ messages. Two common barriers to concentration are *self-centeredness* and *lack of motivation*. Judi Brownell, “Listening Environment: A Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 245.

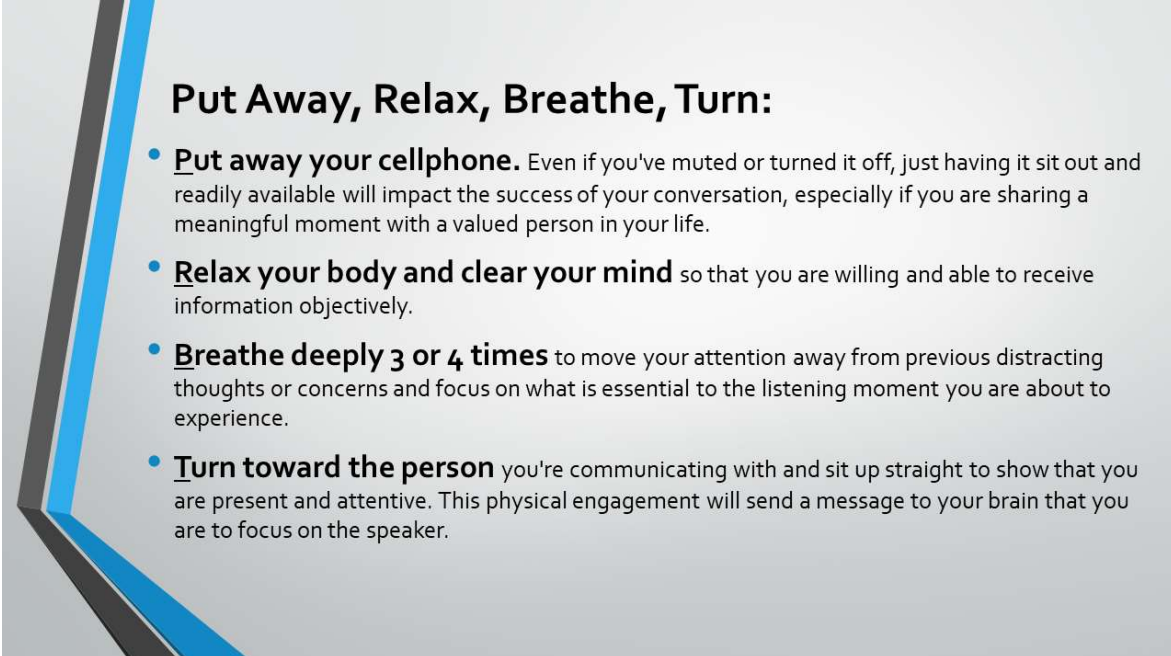
For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we’re sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, 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 stems from the speech and thought rate divide in 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.

However, 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 ultimately influence our response.

Lack of Listening Preparation

Another barrier to effective listening is a general lack of preparation. Most of us have never received formal training or instruction in listening. We may think that listening skills just develop over time. But actually there are 4 simple steps you can take to prepare yourself for all future listening experiences especially if they are of particular value to you. Just think: **PRBT**.



Put Away, Relax, Breathe, Turn:

- **Put away your cellphone.** Even if you've muted or turned it off, just having it sit out and readily available will impact the success of your conversation, especially if you are sharing a meaningful moment with a valued person in your life.
- **Relax your body and clear your mind** so that you are willing and able to receive information objectively.
- **Breathe deeply 3 or 4 times** to move your attention away from previous distracting thoughts or concerns and focus on what is essential to the listening moment you are about to experience.
- **Turn toward the person** you're communicating with and sit up straight to show that you are present and attentive. This physical engagement will send a message to your brain that you are to focus on the speaker.

Although it may be difficult to limit physical barriers, cognitive restraints, and perceptual biases that exist within all of us, your purposeful approach to each listening experience will help direct you to the positive mental attitude you need to improve your listening.

So what are some of those other poor listening habits we're all guilty of falling into when we're sitting next to our favorite aunt, work colleague, or friend from school?

Poor Listening Habits

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 “poor listening” habits may be a challenge to conquer but they can be addressed with concerted effort. These harmful practices include *interrupting*, *distorted listening*, *eavesdropping*, *aggressive listening*, *narcissistic listening*, and *pseudo-listening*

1. 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 "poor 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," 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 poor listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered poor 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 poor quality 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.

2. Distorted Listening

Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively few 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, re-attribute 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 re-attribute 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 lazy listeners 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 healthcare provider to the next. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 191.

3. Aggressive Listening

Aggressive listening is a poor listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin’s, 2007), 209.

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 an interpersonal 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 great to be able to go pick our own tomatoes and peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa.
- **Sandy:** Really? When are you thinking about doing it?
- **Deb:** Oh, in the next couple of weeks or so. When the weather warms up.
- **Sandy:** 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 Sandy'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. Sandy's aggression toward Deb isn't about a salsa garden; it's about a building frustration with what Sandy 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.

4. Narcissistic Listening

Narcissistic listening is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 212.

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 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.
- **Luke:** 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..." Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1995), 68–72.

5. 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. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 208.

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 poor listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs someone to talk to 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. However, 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.

Although it is difficult to eliminate all environmental, physical, and cognitive barriers to effective listening, with real effort we can retrain our brains and rid ourselves of such poor listening habits as interrupting, distorting, ambushing, stage-hogging, and "fake" listening. It will, however, take practice and commitment to do so.

In Summary

- Listening is a learned process and skill that we can improve on with a concerted effort. Improving our listening skills can benefit us in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- Listening is the process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. In the receiving stage, we select and attend to various stimuli based on salience. We then interpret auditory and visual stimuli in order to make meaning out of them based on our existing schemata. Short-term and long-term memory store stimuli until they are discarded or processed for later recall. We then evaluate the credibility, completeness, and worth of a message before responding with verbal and nonverbal signals.
- Environmental and physical barriers to effective listening include furniture placement, environmental noise such as sounds of traffic or people talking, physiological noise such as a sinus headache or hunger, and psychological noise such as stress, anger, or the impending use of technological devices.
- Cognitive barriers to effective listening include the difference between speech and thought rate that allows us "extra room" to think about other things while someone is talking and limitations in our ability or willingness to concentrate or pay attention.

Personal barriers to effective listening include a lack of listening preparation, poorly structured and/or poorly delivered messages, and prejudice.

- There are several poor listening habits that we should avoid, as they do not facilitate effective listening:
 - *Interruptions* that are unintentional or serve an important or useful purpose are not considered bad listening. When interrupting becomes a habit or is used in an attempt to dominate a conversation, then it is a barrier to effective listening.
 - *Distorted listening* occurs when we incorrectly recall information, skew information to fit our expectations or existing schemata, or add material to embellish or change information.
 - *Aggressive listening* is a poor listening practice in which people pay attention to a speaker in order to attack something they say.
 - *Narcissistic listening* is self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them by interrupting, changing the subject, or drawing attention away from others.
 - *Pseudo-listening* is “fake listening,” in that people behave like they are paying attention and listening when they actually are not.