

# Lesson 6.2 Listening Approaches

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. Graham D. Bodie and William A. Villaume, “Aspects of Receiving Information: The Relationships between Listening Preferences, Communication Apprehension, Receiver Apprehension, and Communicator Style,” *International Journal of Listening* 17, no. 1 (2003): 48.

## Reasons to Listen

There are many reasons why we would want to listen to each other; four specific “types” or approaches to listening that we'll examine in this section are--

Types of listening—

- Discriminative listening
- Informational listening
- Empathetic listening
- Critical listening

### 1. 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. With this type of listening we are attempting

to "distinguish" or "differentiate" sounds from other sounds. 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. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 185.

In the absence of a 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



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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. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley, "A Listening Taxonomy," in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 18–19.

## 2. 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.



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Students ought be aware though 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 many professors are.

### 3. 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. Tom Bruneau, “Empathy and Listening,” in *Perspectives on Listening*, eds. Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 188.

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.



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Empathetic listening is key for dialogue and helps maintain interpersonal 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.

In the next section of this unit, we'll provide some tips on how to improve your skills at being a more empathetic listener, but right now let's delve into the final approach to listening which will more than likely be the type you use most often as a student and employee.

#### 4. 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 possible faulty logic. Critical listening is essential during persuasive exchanges, but it's recommended that you always employ

some degree of critical listening because you may find yourself in a persuasive interaction that you thought was informative.



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## In Summary

- Discriminative listening is the most basic form of listening, and we use it to distinguish between and focus on specific sounds.
- We use informational listening to try to comprehend and retain information.
- We use empathetic listening to try to understand or experience what a speaker is feeling.
- Through critical listening, we analyze and evaluate messages at various levels.