

The Ambiguity of Nonverbal Codes

Just as people have difficulty interpreting verbal symbols, they also struggle to interpret nonverbal codes. The ambiguity of nonverbal communication occurs for two reasons: people use the same code to communicate a variety of meanings, and they use a variety of codes to communicate the same meaning.

ONE CODE COMMUNICATES A VARIETY OF MEANINGS

The ambiguity of nonverbal codes occurs in part because one code may communicate several different meanings. For example, the nonverbal code of raising your right hand may mean that you are taking an oath, you are demonstrating for a cause, you are indicating to an instructor that you would like to answer a question, a physician is examining your right side, or you want a taxi to stop for you. Also consider how you may stand close to someone because of a feeling of affection, because the room is crowded, or because you have difficulty hearing. In these examples, the context, or situation, provides important information for how to interpret each code.

Recently, researchers interested in artificial intelligence (AI) have attempted to precisely decode the multiplicity of meanings associated with nonverbal communication.⁶⁵ Despite some successes, such as the ability for AI systems—and potentially even phone apps—to accurately read emotions through facial expressions, the task is daunting. When humans form a facial expression, they use an estimated 10,000 possible combinations of facial muscle movements. Like AI systems, humans naturally process such facial movements as codes that signal meaning. (Humans are currently more efficient than computers.) However, the complexity of so many simultaneous signals means that accurate perception and interpretation of such signals can be challenging, even for the best communicators.

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A VARIETY OF CODES COMMUNICATE THE SAME MEANING

Nonverbal communication is not a science; any number of codes may be used to communicate the same meaning. One example is the many nonverbal ways by which adults communicate love or affection. You may sit or stand more closely to someone you love. You might speak more softly, use a certain vocal intonation, or alter how quickly you speak when you communicate with someone with whom you are affectionate. Or perhaps you choose to dress differently when you are going to be in the company of someone you love.

Cultural differences are especially relevant when we consider that multiple cues may be used to express a similar message. How do you show respect to a speaker in a public speaking situation? In some cultures listeners show respect when they avert their eyes; in other cultures listeners show respect and attention by looking directly at the speaker. You may believe that



listeners show respect and attention by looking directly at the speaker. You may believe that showing your emotions is an important first step in resolving conflict, whereas a classmate may feel that emotional responses interfere with conflict resolution. Although you may have a strong understanding of which codes carry certain meanings in your own culture, those meanings may change completely when interacting with someone from a different culture.

Improving Nonverbal Communication

Skills in being able to effectively interpret and respond to nonverbal cues vary greatly among individuals. You can improve your understanding of nonverbal communication, though, by being sensitive to context, audience, and feedback.

The *context* includes the physical setting, the occasion, and the situation. In conversation, your vocal cues are rarely a problem unless you have distracting speaking habits such as speaking too quickly and using filler words, or you have a speech disorder such as a stutter or a pronounced lisp. Paralinguistic features loom large in importance in small-group communication. For instance, you may need to adapt for distance by talking louder to be heard by people who are sitting far apart. Paralinguistic features are perhaps most important in public speaking because you have to adjust volume and rate, you have to enunciate more clearly, and you have to introduce more vocal variety to keep the audience's attention. The strategic use of pauses and silence is also more apparent in public speaking than it is in an interpersonal context in conversations or small-group discussion. In addition to your vocal cues, the context could affect other nonverbal communication. For example, intercultural contexts could determine the types of bodily movements that are considered appropriate. For instance, in Thailand there is a very specific nonverbal gesture, which looks similar to the “praying” gesture in America, that accompanies greetings and goodbyes.



The occasion and physical setting also affect the potential meaning of a nonverbal cue. For example, when would it be appropriate for you to wear a cap over unwashed, uncombed hair, and when would doing so be interpreted as inappropriate? The distance at which you communicate may be different based on the setting and the occasion: you may stand farther away from people in formal situations when space allows but closer to family members or to strangers in an elevator.

The *audience* makes a difference in your nonverbal communication, so you have to adapt. When speaking to children, you must use a simple vocabulary and careful enunciation, articulation, and pronunciation. If you are speaking to an audience that includes people who are deaf or hard of hearing, you may need to speak louder or ask a sign-language interpreter to assist. Generally, children and older people in both interpersonal and public-speaking situations appreciate slower speech. Also, adaptation to an audience may determine your choice of clothing, hairstyle, and jewelry. For instance, a job interview will most likely require business attire to signal professionalism and credibility.

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Your attention to giving *feedback* can be very important in helping others interpret your nonverbal cues that might otherwise distract your listeners. While you are giving a speech, your listeners' own descriptive feedback—giving quizzical looks, staring, or nodding off—can signal you to talk louder, introduce variety, restate your points, or clarify your message. You can even use nonverbal communication to give your audience feedback. Suppose that you ask the audience a question during the beginning remarks in your presentation, and no one offers an answer. Some speakers might raise their own hand to signal that they are actually seeking a response.

If your conversational partner or audience does not provide you with feedback, what can you do? Practice asking questions and checking on the perceptions of others with whom you communicate. Silence has many meanings, and you sometimes must take great effort to interpret the lack of feedback in a communicative setting. You can also consider your past experience with particular individuals or a similar audience. Do they ever provide feedback? Under what circumstances are they expressive? How can you become more accurate in your interpretation of their feedback?

Although this chapter only introduces you to nonverbal communication, you know that your success in college and in the workplace is dependent on your sensitivity to nonverbal cues and your ability to alter familiar nonverbal cues, given the context and the situation. The following are some suggestions you can use to begin analyzing and improving your own nonverbal communication behaviors:

1. Establish eye contact and demonstrate interest through bodily movement and the use of space and artifacts. A growing concern in our culture is the amount of time that people spend with their smart devices, which are artifacts. How much time do you spend on Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube? Do you plan on “media-free” time while in class, while studying, and while at work? In a recent study, professors attempted to curtail the use of text messaging in class by using positive facial expressions, standing closer to the students, using

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a relaxed stance, and speaking in an animated manner, but these behaviors did not discourage the use of handheld devices.⁶⁶ Consider what you might do to show interest during all communication situations and to avoid being distracted by your phone or unintentionally signaling disinterest through other nonverbal behaviors.

2. Recognize that others may use time differently than you do. In general, it is important to be on time, especially in monochronic cultures such as the United States. You should also think about how your behaviors cause time-stress for others. Waiting until the last minute to ask a critical question, such as how to do an assignment or complete a job task, can cause stress on those on whom you depend.
3. Manage your time to maximize success. Whether you are budgeting time for school activities or attempting to balance your time between work and family, you must make choices that promote success in personal and professional areas. How you choose to budget your time signals to others what you deem as important and also influences how you are able to accomplish important tasks.
4. Manage your time in your interactions with others. Allow others to share their experiences, and be willing to exchange talk time. Do you tend to interrupt or overlap your statements with others' while they are talking? Try your best to allow others a full hearing.
5. Be aware of professional norms that guide nonverbal communication behaviors. Touching, using intimate physical space, requiring time alone after hours, and engaging in other such behaviors are generally inappropriate.
6. Dress appropriately for the situation. Many students have relaxed standards for classroom attire, as permitted by their schools. However, when you transition out of the student role and into the employee role, even if that is as a student-worker on your campus, you will likely need to wear business casual clothing.
7. Avoid using overly dramatic nonverbal behaviors to intentionally or unintentionally signal disagreement. Most people appreciate hearing about differences in opinions, but they do not value sneers or being mocked.

sizing things up

Berkeley Nonverbal Expressiveness Questionnaire

In this chapter you learned that nonverbal communication is used to express meaning generally and emotion in particular. Each statement below describes ways in which you express your emotions through nonverbal communication. Respond to each statement using the following scale. A guide for interpreting your responses appears at the end of the chapter.

1 = Strongly disagree

2

3



1. Whenever I feel positive emotions, people can easily see exactly what I am feeling.
2. I sometimes cry during sad movies.
3. People often do not know what I am feeling.
4. I laugh out loud when someone tells me a joke that I think is funny.
5. It is difficult for me to hide my fear.
6. When I'm happy, my feelings show.
7. My body reacts very strongly to emotional situations.
8. I've learned it is better to suppress my anger than to show it.
9. No matter how nervous or upset I am, I tend to keep a calm exterior.
10. I am an emotionally expressive person.
11. I have strong emotions.
12. I am sometimes unable to hide my feelings, even though I would like to.
13. Whenever I feel negative emotions, people can easily see exactly what I am feeling.
14. There have been times when I have not been able to stop crying even though I tried to stop.
15. I experience my emotions very strongly.
16. What I'm feeling is written all over my face.

Source: Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (1997). Revealing feelings: Facets of emotional expressivity in self-reports, peer ratings, and behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 438.

engaging diversity

Understanding Differences in Nonverbal Communication

A variety of characteristics can be used to identify distinctions among cultures—many of which include nonverbal differences in how we use gestures, space, touch, and even time. If you come from a country other than the United States, the amount of nonverbal adaptation you will need to undertake depends on how similar your culture is to U.S. culture. Although many nonverbal characteristics

Our listening skills begin to develop when we are young children as our family members and friends read aloud or simply recount stories. Through stories, we learn to recognize and remember details, identify patterns and plots, and pick up on certain emotional cues. As we transition into adulthood, we must continue to refine these listening skills.

Since 2003, the StoryCorps project of National Public Radio (NPR) has collected more than 500,000 stories about people's lives. By visiting [storycorps.org](https://www.storycorps.org), you can access thousands of stories that represent the widest array of human emotions, including those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In his book *Listening Is an Act of Love*, Dave Isay, a founder of StoryCorps, commented, "If we take time to listen, we'll find wisdom, wonder, and poetry in the lives and stories of the people all around us."¹ As you listen to stories on the website, take note of how you recognize the emotions behind the story. What did the speakers say or do to help you better understand their explicit and implicit meanings? If you were in a room with the narrators as they told their stories, how would you react? By continuing to practice listening to stories, you not only will find personal fulfillment but also will continue to develop and refine your listening skills.

As you will learn, listening is one of the most frequent communication behaviors you will practice. In this chapter you will learn ways to identify your strengths and areas for improvement as a listener in all types of contexts.



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The Importance of Listening in Our Lives

Listening is one of our most common communication activities. The International Listening Association examined how much time individuals spend reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Those studies found that people spend the greatest amount of their time listening (an average of 44%), followed by speaking (25%), reading (13%), and writing (11%).² Even when you consider online communication, we still spend a great deal of time listening.  **Figure 5.1** shows the results of a recent study of the communication activities in which college students engage: 63% of their time was spent listening to various types of information, with the largest amount of time devoted to listening to others in face-to-face situations. The rest of their time spent in communication activities was dedicated to speaking, reading, and writing. Continued use of digital and social media will likely expand the proportion of our time listening. According to the Pew Research Center, more than 95% of people ages 13 to 17 access YouTube multiple times each day, which is time spent listening to and watching others.³ Given how important listening is to our work as communicators, learning to listen well is critical.

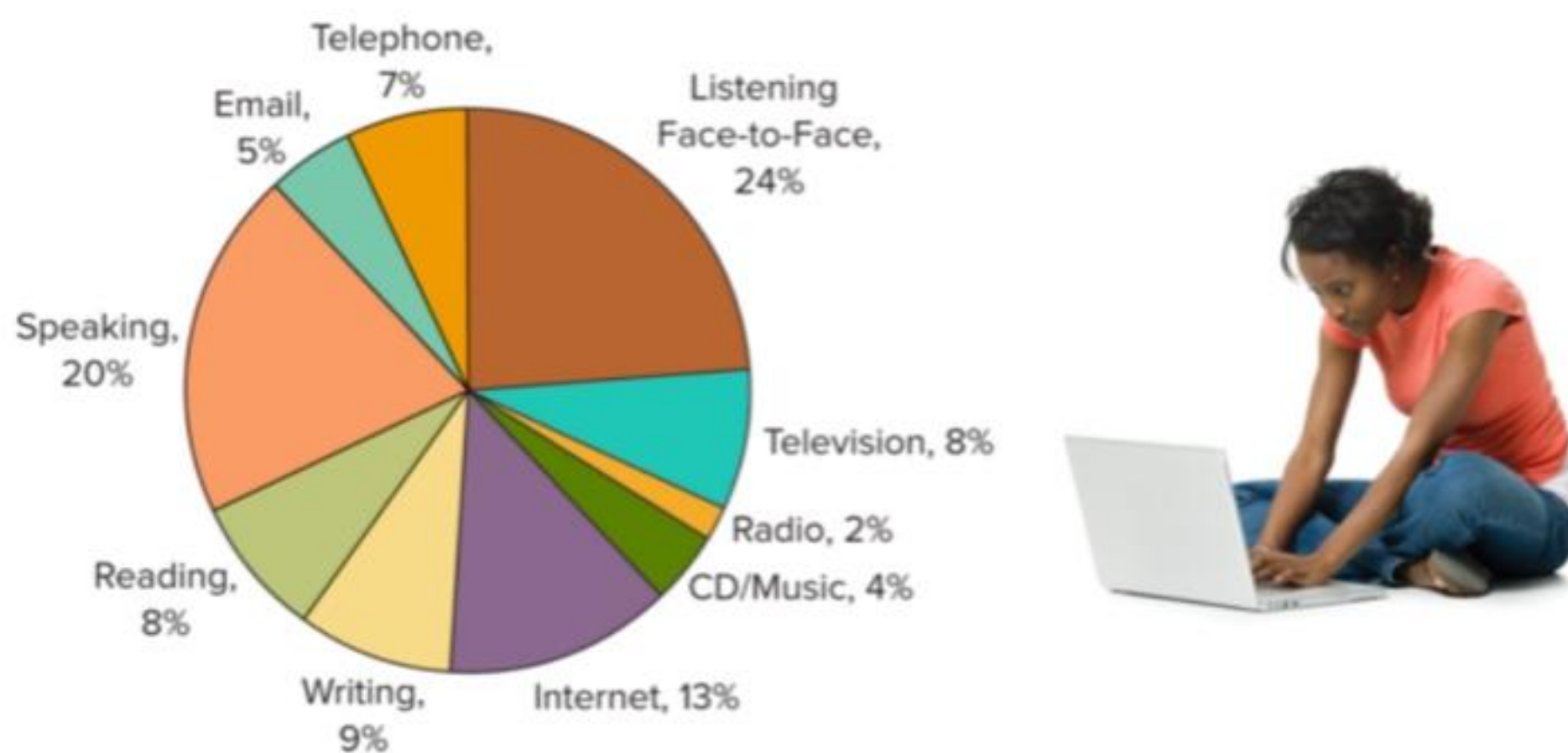


Figure 5.1 Proportions of time spent by college students in communication activities.

Source: Janusik, L., Fullenkamp, L., & Partese, L. (2015). Listening facts. International Listening Association.

(photo): Mike Kemp/Rubberball/Getty Images



As you can imagine from the amount of time we spend listening to others, listening helps us accomplish important things. Listening helps us build and maintain relationships and can even help us determine whether the person we are talking to is being deceitful. How do we learn to be better listeners in our interpersonal relationships? A study reported by Andrew Ledbetter and Paul Schrodtt found that listening skills and behaviors are influenced by family communication patterns we experience early in life. As they noted, “When families create an environment where family members are encouraged to openly discuss a variety of topics, children may be more likely to learn how to process complex and ambiguous information without anxiety.”⁴

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Listening is also recognized as an essential skill for business success.⁵ When reflecting Page 100 on their business successes, executives such as Bill Marriott note that their most important lesson was to create cultures in which managers listen to employees for ideas on how to do things more effectively and efficiently. As a result, better decisions are made.⁶ Organizational cultures that emphasize listening can create positive communication between members of the organization and increase employee engagement.⁷ In addition to promoting internal cultures of listening, the rapid growth of social media has forced organizations of all types to place a greater emphasis on **social media listening**, which occurs when an organization actively monitors and responds to messages on any type of social media platform.⁸ By actively listening to social media messages, organizations are able to track what consumers are saying about their products or services and then use that information to make improvements. Many organizations use sophisticated social media listening/command centers through which they can actively engage and respond to customers on social media to build brand awareness, respond quickly to problems, and generate brand excitement. Both internally and externally, listening is one of the key elements of effective business strategy.

Defining Listening

John Dewey, a twentieth-century educational and social philosopher, observed in his book *The Public and Its Problems* that true democracy happens when we take time to listen to the people around us—our friends and family, our neighbors, and the people in our community.⁹ Dewey's observation seems intuitive, though how often have you “faked” listening? Your friend may tell you about something that happened at work, but you only “half listened”; or you listened to neighbors talk about a community event but quickly forgot what they said. In fact, good listening is hard and takes sustained effort. Learning to be an effective listener starts with understanding what the listening process involves and then progresses to trying to improve how you enact that process.

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The first step in learning about listening is to understand the distinction between hearing and listening. **Hearing** is simply the act of receiving sound. Although much of this chapter is devoted to listening rather than hearing, there are important things to learn about the physical act of hearing. First, your listening behaviors now will influence your hearing later in life.¹⁰ In fact, many audiologists warn that young adults and even children should be careful when listening to music using headphones or earbuds. When using lower-quality earbuds that do not block external noise, people have a tendency to increase the volume to levels that can cause long-term damage to their hearing. Even without hearing loss stemming from loud noise, some people have other physical problems with their hearing. Tinnitus is a condition that results in a constant “ringing” in the ears. The American Tinnitus Association estimates that over 50 million Americans experience tinnitus to some degree—the condition can be caused by many factors, including allergies and certain types of benign tumors.¹¹ Thus, we should not assume that everyone can hear equally well, even those in your group of friends.

Hearing is not the same as listening. **Listening**, as defined by the International Listening Association, is “the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. It involves the ability to retain information, as well as to react empathically and/or appreciatively to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.”¹² **Active listening** is “involved listening with a purpose.”¹³ Active listening includes

- (1) listening carefully by using all available senses
- (2) paraphrasing what we hear both mentally and verbally
- (3) checking our understanding to ensure accuracy
- (4) providing feedback.

Feedback consists of verbal and nonverbal responses to the speaker and the speaker's message. Those who communicate through sign language can listen according to the definition just provided, though many of them may not be able to hear.

Active listening can occur in different forms, including empathic listening and critical listening:

- **Empathic listening** is attempting to understand the perspective of another person. You engage in empathic listening by maintaining awareness, being mindful in the moment, reducing distractions, and responding with empathy to the person with whom you are talking.¹⁴
- **In critical listening** you challenge the speaker's message by evaluating its accuracy, meaningfulness, and utility. Critical listening and critical thinking go hand in hand: you cannot listen critically if you do not think critically. Skills in critical listening are especially important because we are constantly bombarded with commercials, telemarketing calls, and other persuasive messages.

Not all listening is active listening. **Listening for enjoyment** occurs in situations that are relaxing, fun, or emotionally stimulating. Whether listening to a favorite band or just playing YouTube videos, we often use sound to create an escape from other activities or even to provide simple background noise while we perform other tasks. Besides aiding relaxation, listening to enjoyable music has even been found to reduce pain in hospital patients.¹⁵



- Listening for enjoyment is an easy way to relax.

Ken Wramton/Taxi/Getty Images

communicating creatively

Podcasts and Critical Thinking

As presented here, you may assume that listening for enjoyment and critical listening are two separate behaviors. While this is true in some situations, you can practice critical listening skills even while listening for enjoyment. More than 41% of U.S. citizens over the age of 12 report listening to podcasts in the past month. While podcasts are a substantial source of enjoyment for many, the long-form audio narratives found in many podcasts also provide meaningful opportunities for critical thinking. For example, the S-Town podcasts from the

The Process of Listening

The process of listening is summarized in [Figure 5.2](#). As the illustration shows, we receive stimuli (such as music, Qur'an, words, or sounds) in the ear, where the smallest bones in the body translate the vibrations into sensations registered by the brain. For those who are deaf or hard of hearing, the stimuli received might be the visible behaviors of another person. In both instances, the brain focuses attention on the stimuli and gives them meaning using working memory, which is a part of your short-term memory. Your brain might, for example, recognize the first few bars of a favorite song, the voice of a favorite artist, or the sound of a police siren. On hearing these sounds, you immediately know what they mean. Your interpreted message is then stored in schema that reside in your long-term memory for immediate use or future recall.¹⁶

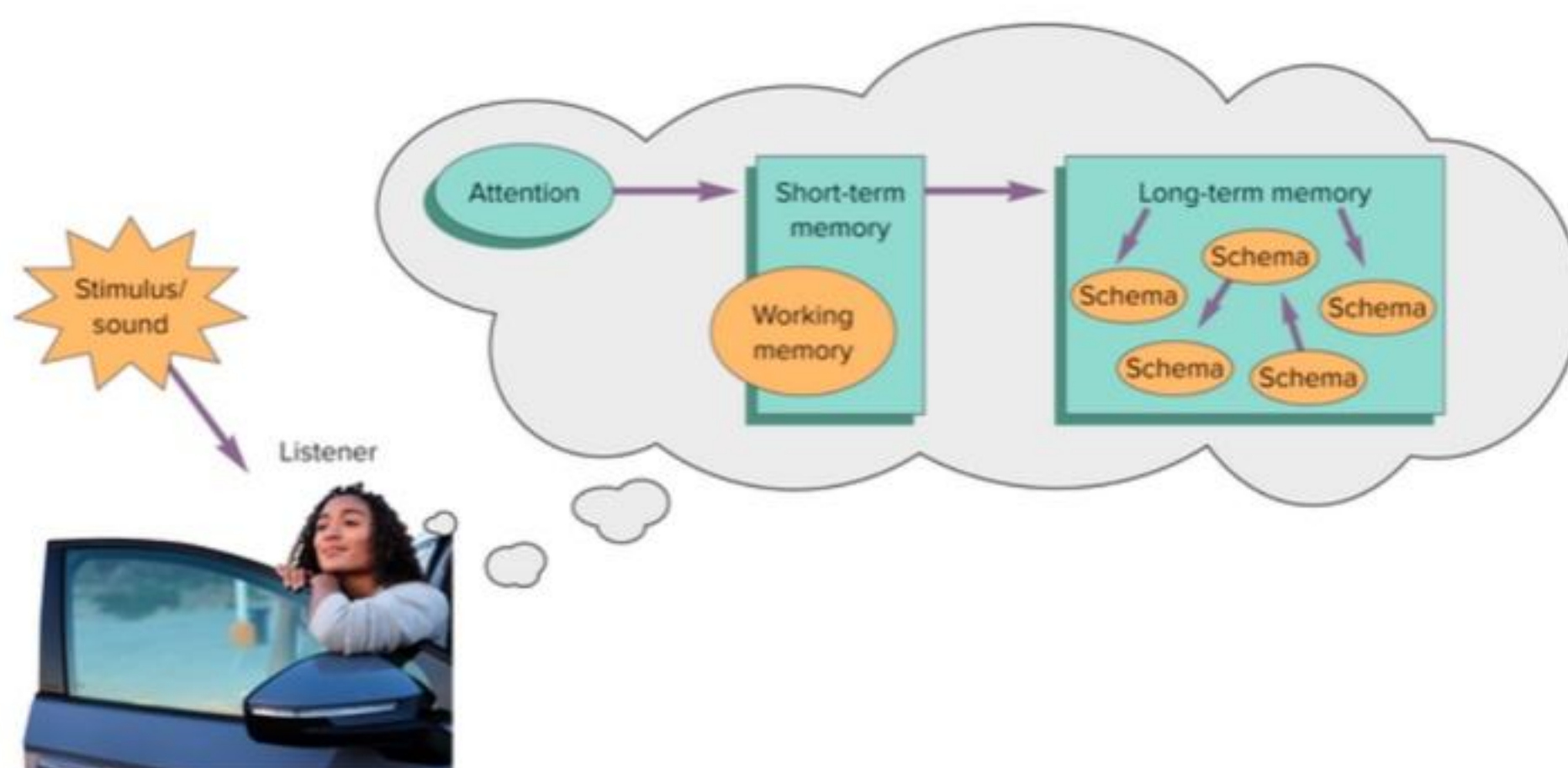


Figure 5.2 The listening process.

(photo): Cavan Images/Alamy Stock Photo



As we discuss later in this chapter, people create many barriers, or obstacles, to effective listening. Not all barriers, however, are the fault of lazy, ineffective, or unethical listeners. Because listening is human behavior, natural barriers present themselves at various stages. In the following sections, these natural barriers are explained for each major step in the listening process: attention, working memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. In fact, if you recall from [Chapter 2](#), you already learned about some of these barriers related to attention and assigning meaning to stimuli. In this chapter we will be discussing similar concepts, perhaps with more specificity.

ATTENTION

Anyone who has been a student has heard the command “Pay attention!” What exactly are teachers expecting when they say this? Paying attention means controlling your selective and automatic attention.¹⁷ **Selective attention** is the sustained focus we give to things that are important. Your favorite music, a conversation with your friend, statements made by your date over dinner, and your professor at the front of the class are things that draw your selective

attention. Selective attention is a form of selective perception (see [Chapter 2](#)). In contrast, **automatic attention** is the instinctive focus we give to important things we experience in our surroundings. A siren, a loud noise, your name shouted from across the room, or a new person walking into the room can capture your automatic attention. In any listening situation, we must manage our selective attention to keep it from being overwhelmed by our automatic attention. In essence, by saying “Pay attention,” your teacher is asking you to ignore your automatic attention and focus your selective attention. However, you should not assume that selective attention means paying attention to only one thing. In fact, we learn to quickly scan our surroundings and assess the importance of several items of interest as they relate to one another.¹⁸ Think about what happens when you drive. As you scan the road in front of you, you must also take care to use your peripheral vision to see activity on the side of the road, such as children playing. You must also listen for important sounds such as horns or emergency sirens. Driving is a complex activity that requires scanning and analyzing hundreds of potential cues; having a conversation is just as complex because the cues are more subtle.

Our ability to quickly scan social media is a valuable and transferable skill. Being able to scan, read, and react to situations, both virtual and face-to-face, is useful in a variety of personal and professional situations. Be warned, however, that excessive reliance on this use of selective attention can cause problems. A recent study found that when students text or use social media during class, their performance on quizzes and tests can drop by as much as one-and-a-half letter grades.¹⁹ Allowing your selective attention to scan too much of your environment can overwhelm your ability to make meaning of specific, and perhaps important, stimuli.

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WORKING MEMORY

Once we have paid selective attention to relevant sounds and stimuli, our brain must initially process and make sense of those stimuli. **Working memory** is the part of our short-term memory that interprets and assigns meaning to things we hear. Our working memory looks for shortcuts when processing information. When you hear people speak, your working memory quickly recognizes patterns of sounds that represent words, phrases, and ideas. Using your prior knowledge, which is stored in long-term memory, your working memory assigns meaning to what you are hearing and allows you to respond. Thus, when you hear a family member say, “A storm is coming,” your working memory allows you to assign meaning to that sentence and plan your travel or other actions in anticipation of what that sentence means. The patterns we recognize and respond to with working memory resources are critical for effective and efficient communication with others.

Working memory uses patterns of words or other symbols stored in long-term memory to apply these shortcuts for assigning meaning. Not surprisingly, research has found that when children have difficulty with language development, they have less efficient working memory.²⁰ That is, when children do not learn language skills and develop strong vocabularies, their working memory must work harder to decipher new information. Of course, the opposite is also true.

Barriers to Listening

Although you might agree that listening is important, you may not be properly prepared for effective listening. A 2013 study by a doctoral student at the University of Phoenix found a very strong correlation between listening skills and workplace productivity.²³ Thus, it is not surprising that research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that effective and empathetic listening is one of the most important factors in promoting workplace productivity.²⁴ Unfortunately, other research has shown that 88% of the employers surveyed indicated that finding individuals with good listening skills is difficult or at least somewhat challenging.²⁵ In this section we explain several barriers that can challenge our listening effectiveness, including noise, perceptions of others, and yourself. For explanations and examples of these types of barriers, see [Table 5.1](#).

Table 5.1 Barriers to Listening	
Type of Barrier	Explanation and Example
NOISE	
Physical distractions	All the stimuli in the environment that keep you from focusing on the message. Example: loud music playing at a party
Mental distractions	The wandering of the mind when it is supposed to be focusing on something. Example: thinking about a lunch date while listening to a teacher
Multitasking	Trying to do two or more tasks simultaneously. Example: reading an article while carrying on a conversation with family
Factual distractions	Focusing so intently on details that you miss the main point. Example: listening to all the details of a conversation but forgetting the main idea
Semantic distractions	Overresponding to an emotion-laden word or concept. Example: not listening when someone claims to be “conservative” or “progressive”
PERCEPTION OF OTHERS	
Status	Devoting attention based on the social standing, rank, or perceived value of another. Example: not listening to a freshman in a group activity
Stereotypes	Treating individuals as if they were the same as others in a given category. Example: making assumptions about how to interpret the words of another based on race or ethnicity
Sights and sounds	Letting appearances or voice qualities affect your listening. Example: assuming that a person with long hair and tattoos will make poor arguments
YOURSELF	

Egocentrism	Excessive self-focus, or seeing yourself as the central concern in every conversation. Example: redirecting group conversations to your own interests
Defensiveness	Acting threatened and feeling as though you must defend what you have said or done. Example: assuming others' comments are veiled criticisms of you
Experiential superiority	Looking down on others as if their life experiences were not as good as yours. Example: not listening to a coworker who is new
Personal bias	Letting your own predispositions, or strongly held beliefs, interfere with your ability to interpret information correctly. Example: assuming that people are generally truthful (or deceitful)
Pseudolistening	Pretending to listen but letting your mind or attention wander to something else. Example: texting while your professor is lecturing

The barriers listed in [Table 5.1](#) are common, but as our cultural listening habits change, these barriers evolve and new ones are added. A conference sponsored by the International Commission on Biological Effects of Noise noted that the proliferation of noise created by humans—everything from cars and airplanes to smartphones and video games—is starting to cause fatal accidents for adults and poorer achievement in children because of the sheer number of audible distractions.²⁶ Likewise, Lenore Skenazy, writing in *Advertising Age*, complained that smartphones and other personal communication devices might be diminishing ongoing practice with face-to-face communication skills, such as listening.²⁷ Other studies show that listening to loud, fast music significantly diminishes our ability to comprehend things we read or hear.²⁸ In sum, these barriers point to one conclusion: our listening practices are more complicated because more and more things draw our attention.

Modern technology, including smartphones, laptops, smartwatches, and tablets, can pose challenges for good listening. If you are in a large class, you have probably even seen people carry on telephone conversations using earbuds to try to conceal their behaviors. When we multitask by trying to listen to someone while texting, posting a picture, or just browsing on the internet, we are likely diminishing our ability to function well as a listener. Recall that short-term memory is limited. When we multitask, we place greater strain on our working memory and short-term memory, which can impede all other aspects of our ability to process information. For instance, assume you are listening to a training podcast for your job and you decide to answer a text from your partner. Each time you stop listening to the podcast to read or answer a text, you lose mental momentum on your listening and have to restart. In fact, our own research on this topic shows that in classroom situations, students record 62% less information in their notes when they multitask by texting or posting on social media during the lesson.²⁹

The current polarized social and political climate observed across the globe has started to create poor listening habits. Writing for the Huffington Post, psychologist Chloe Carmichael

Helping children develop strong language skills early in life will likely help them become better listeners later.

SHORT-TERM MEMORY

Once interpreted in working memory, information is sent to the short-term or long-term memory. **Short-term memory** is a temporary storage place for information. We all use short-term memory to retain thoughts needed for immediate use. You might think of short-term memory as being similar to a Post-it note. You will use the information on the note for a quick reference but will soon discard it or decide to write it down in a more secure location.

We constantly use short-term memory, but it is the least efficient of our memory resources. Classic studies in the field of psychology have documented that short-term memory is limited in both the quantity of information stored and the length of time information is retained.²¹ In terms of quantity, short-term memory is limited to five to nine “bits” of information. A bit of information is any organized unit of information, including sounds, letters, words, sentences, or something less concrete, such as ideas, depending on the ability of working memory to recognize patterns. For instance, experts in a particular area can recognize patterns easily and therefore can organize large amounts of information into a single bit. Nonexperts have more difficulty in recognizing patterns and must therefore use more bits to organize the same amount of information. You experienced this as you learned language. When you began reading, you processed each letter individually, so each letter was a bit of information. As you became better at reading, you naturally started to process words, then phrases, and then entire paragraphs or even pages of text as a bit of information within your short-term memory.

If your short-term memory becomes overloaded (for average people, more than nine bits of information), you begin to forget. Short-term memory is also limited to about 20 seconds in duration unless some strategy, such as rehearsal, is used. If you quickly scan and rehearse a definition from your textbook in preparation for a quiz, you will likely remember it. However, if something breaks your concentration and you stop rehearsing the definition, the words will likely be lost. Unfortunately, many listeners rely too much on short-term memory during the listening process. Researchers in the field of communication have found that individuals recall only 50% of a message immediately after listening to it and only 25% after a short delay.²² Relying on our short-term memory is not a substitute for trying to encode information into long-term memory.



- Being startled can break your concentration and cause you to forget what is in short-term memory.

PhotoTalk/Getty Images

LONG-TERM MEMORY

Information processed in working memory can also be stored in long-term memory for later recall. Similarly, information temporarily stored in short-term memory can be deemed important and subsequently stored in long-term memory. If short-term memory is the Post-it note in the listening process, long-term memory is the supercomputer. **Long-term memory** is our permanent storage place for information, including past experiences; language; values; knowledge; images of people; memories of sights, sounds, and smells; and even fantasies. Unlike short-term memory, long-term memory has no known limitations in the quantity or duration of stored information.

Explanations of how long-term memory works are only speculative; however, researchers hypothesize that our thoughts are organized according to **schemas**, which are organizational “filing systems” for thoughts held in long-term memory. We might think of schemas as an interconnected web of information. Our ability to remember information in long-term memory is dependent on finding connections to the correct schema containing the particular memory, thought, idea, or image we are trying to recall.

In theory, people with normally functioning brains never lose information stored in long-term memory. How is it, then, that we often forget things we listened to? When we try to access information in long-term memory, we access schemas holding needed information through the use of stimulus cues, which can be words, images, or even smells and tastes. If the cue we receive does not give us enough information to access the corresponding schema, we may be unable to recall the information. Consider, for example, a situation in which you see a person who looks familiar. In this case you recognize the person (a visual cue); however, that stimulus does not provide you with enough information to recall who the person is. If you hear the person’s voice or are reminded of a previous encounter with the person, you may then have enough information to activate the correct schema and recall specific details about that person.

Long-term memory plays a key role in the listening process. As we receive sounds, our working memory looks for patterns based on schemas contained in our long-term memory. Thus, our ability to use language, to recognize concepts, and to interpret meaning is based on the schemas we accumulate over a lifetime. If we encounter new information that does not relate to a preexisting schema, our working memory instructs our long-term memory to create a new schema to hold the information.

executive who regularly looks at the clock during a meeting are all indicating lack of interest. Try to focus on and direct your gaze at the speaker. When you begin to look around the room, you may find any number of other stimuli to distract your attention from the speaker and the message.

8. *Sit or stand close to the speaker.* Establishing close proximity to the speaker has two benefits. First, you put yourself in a position that allows you to hear the other person and that minimizes distracting noises, sights, and other stimuli. Second, you demonstrate your concern or your positive feelings for the speaker. You probably do not stand or sit close to people you do not like or respect or with whom you do not have common experiences. Close physical proximity enables active listening.
9. *Be vocally responsive.* Change your pitch, rate, inflection, and volume as you respond to the speaker. Making appropriate changes and choices shows that you are actually listening, in contrast to responding in a standard, patterned manner that suggests you are only appearing to listen. Responding to your roommate or partner's story about an exciting event at work with a dull, monotone "yeah, that's great," accompanied by frequent glances at your phone, would not signal active listening.
10. *Provide supportive utterances.* Sometimes you can demonstrate more concern through nonverbal sounds, such as "mmm," "mmm-hmm," and "uh-huh" than you can by stating, "Yes, I understand." You can easily provide supportive utterances while others are talking or when they pause. You are suggesting to them that you are listening but do not want to interrupt with a verbalization of your own at this particular time. Such sounds encourage the speaker to continue without interruption.



- Close proximity, and even touching, can show that you are listening with empathy.

Eric Audras/Onoky/SuperStock

engaging diversity

Using Touch as Feedback

We use a variety of nonverbal behaviors to provide feedback and demonstrate that we are listening carefully. Touch is often used to signal that we are listening

meaningfulness, and utility of a speaker's message. Similarly, **critical thinking** involves analyzing the speaker, the situation, and the speaker's ideas to make critical judgments about the message being presented. Although we discuss critical thinking in terms of its relationship to critical listening, you also use critical thinking when reading, watching television, or analyzing the ingredients of a tasty meal.

One way to think critically is to analyze the communication situation. Are there characteristics of the situation that tip you off that the information will be important? If your supervisor organized a staff meeting, would you pay more attention if she came in with a somber look on her face after a long meeting with the department manager? The communication context will provide cues about the situation and suggest key things to remain aware of while listening.

A second skill in critical listening is to analyze the credibility of the speaker. **Source credibility** is the extent to which you perceive the speaker as competent and trustworthy. If you wanted to know what procedures are required to study in Europe for a semester, who would give you the best information? Would you be more likely to trust your roommate, who heard about foreign exchange programs during freshman orientation; your adviser, who had an exchange student a few years back; or the director of international programs on your campus? If your car ran poorly, would you trust your neighbor's advice or that of an auto mechanic? The choice seems obvious in these situations. When assessing the credibility of a speaker, you should determine the credibility of the person in relation to his or her qualifications, experience, and potential biases or ulterior motives for taking a certain position.

One way of analyzing the credibility of speakers is to determine whether they are reporting something they have seen or experienced personally or something they have heard from someone else. Also important is whether they are providing factual accounts or opinions. The following questions can guide your preliminary analysis of source credibility.

- *Is the person presenting observations or inferences?* Observations are descriptions of things that can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or felt. Inferences are conclusions drawn from observations. You might observe that a number of people who are homeless live in your community. Based on that observation, you might infer that your community does not have enough affordable housing.
- *If presenting observations, are they first-person or second-person?* A **first-person observation** is based on something that was personally sensed; a **second-person observation** is a report of what another person observed. First-person observations are typically more accurate because they are direct accounts rather than inferences drawn from others' accounts.

Although a careful analysis of these questions will help you develop initial perceptions about a person's credibility, your analysis should not end there. The speaker's sincerity, trustworthiness, passion, and use of evidence and reasoning are among many factors that you might take into account to refine your assessment of the speaker's credibility.

After you have analyzed the situation and formed initial impressions about the speaker's

credibility, a final step in critical thinking is to analyze the arguments the speaker is making. One of the simplest ways of analyzing an argument is to use Stephen Toulmin's concepts of data, claim, and warrant.³³ As shown in  **Figure 5.3**, Toulmin provides a way of diagramming how the components of an argument fit together. A claim is the overall point or conclusion of the argument. Every argument begins with data, which consist of factual or agreed-upon evidence. Based on the evidence, a speaker uses a warrant to develop a logical connection, or bridge, between the agreed-upon data and the claim. If any of these elements are missing, the argument has no foundation.

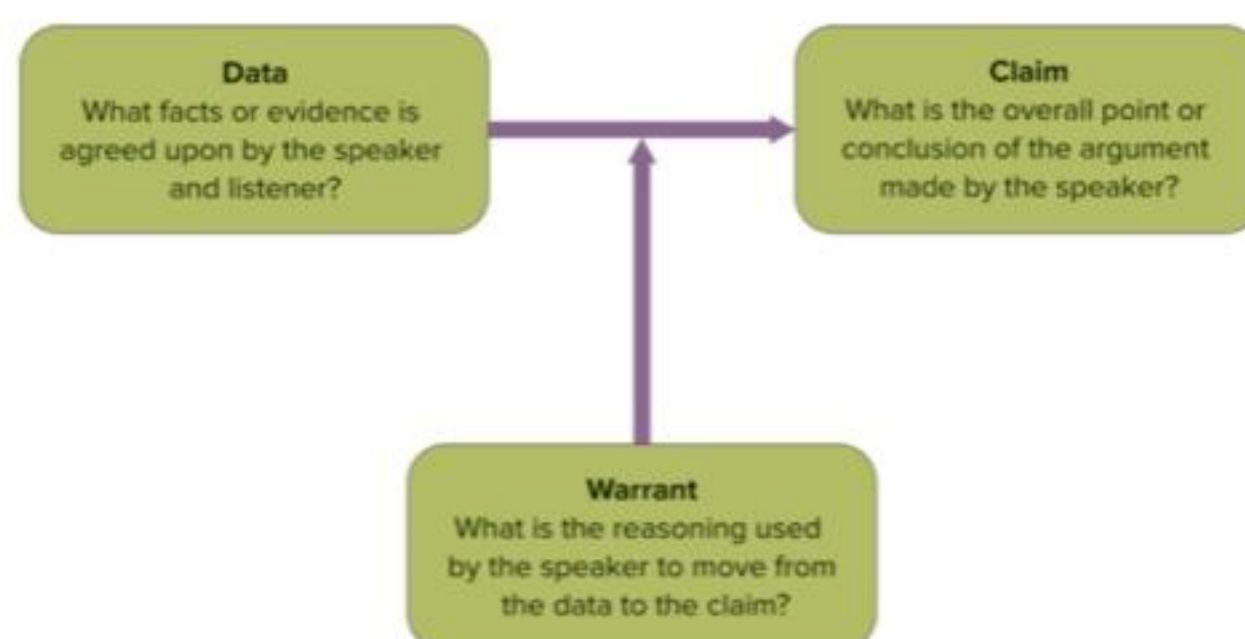


Figure 5.3 Stephen Toulmin's concepts of data, claim, and warrant.

Source: Toulmin, S. E. (1958) *The uses of argument*. Cambridge University Press.



We see examples of Toulmin's argument layout in nearly every persuasive speech. When Apple executives plan events to introduce new product models, or in some instances brand new devices, they typically begin with the data that consumers want technology that is useful and easy-to-use. Then, Tim Cook or other speakers go on to explain how new devices or software updates will accomplish that objective. Through multiple live examples, those presenters develop strong warrants that connect believable assumptions about what consumers want with the conclusion that purchasing Apple's new products will meet those needs. Think about how this strategy was used for the iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch with great success. Using the questions posed in  **Figure 5.3**, you can analyze nearly any argument to think more critically about what another person is saying.

building behaviors

Using TED to Practice Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is one of the most important listening skills you can develop while in college. Being a good critical listener is vital to all aspects of your adult life. You can practice suggestions for critical thinking discussed in this chapter by watching a TED talk on a topic of interest to you ( www.TED.com, or use the free mobile TED app). While watching the video, analyze the speaker's credibility

USE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVELY

Although you demonstrate active listening through verbal skills, the majority of your active listening ability is shown through nonverbal communication. The following nonverbal skills are essential to your ability to demonstrate active listening. As you listen to another person, have a friend observe you to determine if you are practicing these skills.

1. *Demonstrate bodily responsiveness.* Use movement and gestures to show your awareness of the speaker's message. Shaking your head in disbelief, conveying the measurements of an object by indicating the size with your hands, and moving toward a person who is quietly disclosing negative information are appropriate bodily responses.
2. *Lean forward.* By leaning toward the speaker, you demonstrate interest in the speaker. A forward lean also suggests responsiveness. In addition, leaning places you in a physical state of readiness to listen to the speaker.
3. *Use direct body orientation.* Do not angle yourself away from the speaker; instead, sit or stand so that you are directly facing the speaker. A parallel body position allows the greatest possibility for observing and listening to the speaker's verbal and nonverbal messages. When you stand or sit at an angle to the speaker, you may be creating the impression that you are attempting to get away or that you are moving away from the speaker. An angled position also blocks your vision and allows you to be distracted by other stimuli in the environment.
4. *Maintain relaxed but alert posture.* Your posture should not be tense or "proper," but neither should it be so relaxed that you appear to be resting. Slouching suggests unresponsiveness; a tense body position suggests nervousness or discomfort; and a relaxed position accompanied by crossed arms and legs, a backward lean in a chair, and a confident facial expression suggests arrogance. Your posture should suggest to others that you are interested and that you are comfortable talking with them.
5. *Establish an open body position.* Sit or stand with your body open to the other person. Crossing your arms or legs may be more comfortable, but that posture frequently suggests that you are closed off psychologically as well as physically. To maximize your nonverbal message to the other person that you are "open," you should sit or stand without crossing your arms or legs.
6. *Use positive, responsive facial expressions and head movement.* Your face and head will be the speaker's primary focus. The speaker will be observing you, and your facial expressions and head movement will be the key. You can demonstrate your interest by nodding your head to show interest or agreement. You can use positive and responsive facial expressions, such as smiling and raising your eyebrows.
7. *Establish direct eye contact.* The speaker will be watching your eyes for interest. One of the first signs of a lack of interest is the tendency to be distracted by other stimuli in the environment. For example, an instructor who continually glances out the door of the lecture hall, a roommate who sneaks peeks at the television while you tell a story, and a business

that we are listening carefully. Touch is often used to signal that we are listening and to provide feedback. For example, we may use a hug or a simple hand on the shoulder to console someone.

Researchers from multiple fields are developing greater awareness that substantial diversity exists between individuals on how they both practice and perceive empathy. Neuroscientists from Germany found that individuals who are more likely to be empathetic are also more strongly oriented toward touching behaviors. In essence, these individuals are more likely to touch another person when showing empathy and are more likely to perceive touch from another as signaling empathy. Conversely, individuals who dislike being touched may be less likely to engage in empathetic listening behaviors. This research teaches us that diversity in how we perceive the world, such as our perceptions of touch, can substantially impact how we listen to and respond to others.

Source: Schaefer, M., Joch, M., & Rother, N. (2021, February 9). Feeling touched: Empathy is associated with performance in a tactile acuity test. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2021.593425

USE VERBAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVELY

The notion of the verbal components of listening may seem strange to you. You may reason that, if you are engaged in listening, you cannot also be speaking. Recall though that communication is a process that includes feedback. While listening, you must use both verbal and nonverbal feedback to negotiate meaning with another person. To measure your current competence in this area, consider the skills you regularly practice:

1. *Invite additional comments.* Suggest that the speaker add more details or give additional information. Phrases such as “Go on,” “What else?” “How did you feel about that?” and “Did anything else happen?” encourage the speaker to continue to share ideas and information.
2. *Ask questions.* One method of inviting the speaker to continue is to ask direct questions, requesting more in-depth details, definitions, or clarification.
3. *Identify areas of agreement or common experience.* Briefly relate similar past experiences, or briefly explain a similar point of view that you hold. Sharing ideas, attitudes, values, and beliefs is the basis of communication. In addition, such comments demonstrate your understanding.
4. *Vary verbal responses.* Use a variety of responses, such as “Yes,” “I see,” “Go on,” and “Right,” instead of relying on one standard, unaltered response, such as “Yes,” “Yes,” “Yes.”
5. *Provide clear verbal responses.* Use specific and concrete words and phrases in your feedback to the speaker. Misunderstandings can occur if you do not provide easily understood responses.
6. *Use descriptive, nonevaluative responses.* It is better to say, “Your statistics are from an organization that is biased against gun control,” which is descriptive, than to say, “Your

speech was a bunch of lies,” which is evaluative. Trivializing or joking about serious disclosures suggests a negative evaluation of the speaker. Similarly, derogatory remarks are seen as offensive. Acting superior to the speaker by stating that you believe you have a more advanced understanding suggests an evaluative tone.

7. *Provide affirmative and affirming statements.* Comments such as “Yes,” “I see,” “I understand,” and “I know” provide affirmation. Offering praise and specific positive statements demonstrates concern.
8. *Avoid complete silence.* The lack of any response suggests that you are not listening to the speaker. The “silent treatment” induced by sleepiness or lack of interest may result in defensiveness or anger on the part of the speaker. Appropriate verbal feedback demonstrates your active listening.
9. *Allow other people the opportunity of a complete hearing.* When you discuss common feelings or experiences, avoid dominating the conversation. Allow others to go into depth and detail, give them the option of changing the topic under discussion, and let them talk without being interrupted.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

When we listen to others, we are actually engaging in a specialized form of the perception process (see [Chapter 2](#)). Because listening is a specialized form of perceiving, you should engage in perception checking to ensure that your perceptions match what the speaker intends. In the context of listening, rather than calling this perception checking, we might refer to it as checking your understanding. You can check your understanding by practicing these skills:

1. *Ask questions for clarification.* Before testing your understanding of the speaker’s message, make sure you have a clear idea of what is being said. Begin by asking questions to gain more information. For specific factual information, you may use closed questions (such as yes or no questions), and for more general information you may ask open-ended questions (questions pertaining to what, when, where, how, and why). Once you have gained sufficient information, you can ask the speaker to check your understanding against what was intended.
2. *Paraphrase the speaker’s message.* Using “I statements,” attempt to paraphrase what you think the speaker was saying so that the speaker can determine whether your understanding matches what was intended.
3. *Paraphrase the speaker’s intent.* Using “I statements,” attempt to paraphrase what you interpret as the intent or motivation of the speaker. After hearing your assumptions about the intent, the speaker may talk with you more to refine your understanding.
4. *Identify areas of confusion.* If there are specific aspects of the message that you are still confused about, mention those to the speaker while you are expressing your initial understanding of the message.
5. *Invite clarification and correction.* Asking the speaker to correct your interpretation of the

message will invite additional explanation. The ensuing dialogue will help you and the speaker share meaning more effectively.

6. *Go back to the beginning.* As necessary, return to the first step in this process to check your new understanding of the speaker's message and intent. Good listening is a process without clear beginning and ending points, so you should check your understanding at each stage in the process.



- Taking notes is an effective strategy to maintain attention and easily remember information.

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TAKE GOOD NOTES

Note-taking is one of the most effective skills you can develop as a listener, particularly as a college student. Several options, or formats, are available to you as a note-taker, including the narrative method, the matrix method, the outline method, the mind-map method, and the Cornell method. You can find additional information about each method by searching online, or your school may have a learning resource center that can provide additional assistance.

- The *narrative method* uses complete sentences and paragraph structure to try to record ideas as close as possible to word-for-word. Many people opt for this approach when using a laptop or tablet. Although this method is useful when exact wording is critical, it is also the most difficult method because people tend to speak faster than we can write. Moreover, these types of notes often lack the organization necessary for efficient review.
- The *matrix method* organizes information into rows and columns, similar to what a spreadsheet looks like. This format is useful when you need to emphasize details within the intersections of multiple categories. Therefore, if you had rows for each of the communication contexts (interpersonal, small group, public speaking, and so on), one column for verbal communication, and a second column for nonverbal communication, the intersecting cells in that matrix would allow you to note an example illustrating nonverbal communication in public speaking, verbal communication in small groups, and any other combination of communication types and contexts.
- The *outline method* uses numbers and letters to indicate main points and subordinate points, respectively. Each set of subordinate points is typically indented under more general or main

points. This method requires you to summarize key concepts and points and supporting details. This format of note-taking is effective and a good general-purpose approach.

Although more organized than the narrative method, it potentially conceals the types of interrelationships made apparent by the matrix method.

- The *mind-map method* uses a web-like diagram to show how concepts are connected. This visual approach is particularly useful for brainstorming ideas and synthesizing information after a lecture or reading assignment. Using this method during a lecture may be challenging because it may not be immediately apparent how information should visually connect.
- The *Cornell method* uses columns to organize information. For this method you will divide your paper into a wide column on the right and a narrow column on the left. In the wide column, you should record details using an outline format, bullet points, sentences, or key terms. In the smaller column, you should synthesize and identify the main points, make comments to yourself, and note key details such as definitions and answers to known test questions. Like outlining, this is a good general-purpose note-taking approach.

The most effective note-takers use combinations of each method depending on the circumstances. Both the outlining and Cornell methods work well across a variety of situations, though some content might be particularly favorable for a matrix or mind-map format. No single method might be best. Your objective as a learner should be to format notes to fit your study habits and the information you are trying to learn.

We often assume that note-taking is limited to classrooms. However, many people carry small composition books to record notes and reflections from meetings, one-on-one conversations, and other nonclassroom contexts. Many people also take notes digitally using an iPad or similar device equipped with a stylus. Regardless of the technology used, note-taking is a listening skill that is valuable across situations.



percentage in perspective, the corresponding 2011 value was 35%.⁴⁶ How do people use the internet? As of 2022, average internet users spend roughly 2.5 hours per day on social media.⁴⁷ These findings suggest that much of what we listen to and consume comes from online sources. In fact, most college-age students get the majority of their news from online sources rather than more traditional print, broadcast, and cable outlets. Moreover, much of our communication with others flows through digital channels, such as email, text messages, and social media posts.

Online communication requires different approaches to being an effective listener and consumer of communication. The principal problem with online communication—whether you are texting someone or messaging on social media—is that nonverbal communication is difficult. Recall that nonverbal communication provides significant clues about another person's emotions and feelings. Without the ability to see and hear the other person, how can you tell what that person might be thinking? When communicating using digital tools, you may perceive messages in ways not intended. For instance, you may interpret a short message as being angry or abrupt when, in fact, the person was texting while doing something else. When using other tools, such as Instagram or Facebook, remember that our comments and posts are often full of subtexts and hidden meanings. Take care to check your understanding of messages and intentions when consuming personal messages from others.



- Online communication can cause emotional reactions to what others say. When listening on social media or elsewhere online, we benefit by checking our understanding before reacting.

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LISTENING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Many of the suggestions provided in this chapter are for both native English speakers and English language learners (ELLs). However, if you are a nonnative speaker, some understanding of how to further develop your listening skills can speed your progress as an effective listener. Research suggests that second-language listening development requires two skills: vocabulary comprehension and metacognitive awareness.⁴⁸ Vocabulary comprehension is more than just memorizing lists of terms. Rather, vocabulary is strengthened by recognizing the sounds of words and associating those sounds with their meaning. Being immersed in a

new culture will assist you in developing such connections, particularly if you seek out and engage in sustained conversations with others. You can also use television and other media to broaden your listening experiences and assist you in vocabulary development.

In addition to developing your vocabulary, you should try to develop your metacognitive skills. Metacognition is your ability to use “mental strategies” to assist in quickly determining the meaning of words. Learning to decipher words by drawing inferences on their meaning from the context and other words around them is one such strategy. Another example of metacognition is drawing parallels between English vocabulary and your native vocabulary. Through such strategies you will make quicker inferences about what new terms mean and will be able to listen more efficiently.

Of course, if you have difficulty listening because the other person is speaking rapidly or using words you have not heard, you should feel comfortable telling the person. Adaptation to language differences is the responsibility of everyone involved in a communication situation, and you should not take on the entire challenge of trying to make the interaction succeed.

Ways to Be an Ethical Listener

Although effective listening requires you to adapt your verbal, nonverbal, and perception-checking skills to specific situations, such as the workplace, the classroom, and mediated environments, you must also take care to enact ethical listening behaviors. To be an ethical listener, you should practice the following behaviors:

1. *Recognize the sources of your own conversational habits.* Your family, school, and other life experiences have allowed you to develop certain habits, which in some situations could be strengths and in others could represent areas for improvement. Recognizing those habits will allow you to more fully adapt to those with whom you are communicating.
2. *Monitor your communication to recognize when you are engaging in poor listening behaviors.* Perhaps the most important step in becoming an ethical listener is recognizing that you must work hard to be a good listener—a step that begins with an awareness of what you are doing in the situation.
3. *Apply general ethical principles to how you respond.* Planning your responses so that you are respectful to others is an example of how your personal ethics can influence your listening behaviors.
4. *Adapt to others.* Recognize that other people also have unique communication styles and that you might need to adapt your listening behaviors so that you can fully understand what they are trying to say.⁴⁹

be ready... for what's next

Taking Notes with Apps

One of the most important skills that you will develop in college is note-taking. Good notes now may influence your performance on a test or an assignment; good notes after graduation may affect your job performance. Many smartphone, tablet, or laptop apps can be used for note-taking. People often use these apps because they are efficient and provide a secure storage option for important notes.

The recently published book *Digital Distractions in the College Classroom* synthesizes advantages and disadvantages of using digital devices and apps in the classroom. Although taking digital notes can be as effective as taking handwritten notes, using your device to take notes can present a number of distractions, including social media notifications and the temptation to multitask. When using a notetaking app, you should take practical steps to avoid distractions, such as putting your device on airplane mode and silencing notifications. Additionally, many tablets and apps allow you to use digital pencils to take notes by hand. This approach can combine many of the advantages of