Overview

Listening is essential in every aspect of life today. Yet weak listening skills can interfere with successful communication. For example, have you ever asked for directions, thought you listened carefully, only to discover that you were lost a few minutes later? Everyone misinterprets or only half listens once in a while. In fact, listening problems are so common that many universities and businesses offer seminars to improve listening skills. Few people can develop good listening skills without training and a desire to learn these skills, however. The job of strengthening and enhancing your listening skills is a lifelong task, one that offers satisfying rewards.

The purpose of this course is to increase your ability to listen effectively. Its five lessons suggest techniques that you can practice to increase your listening skills. Lesson 1 answers the question, What constitutes effective listening? Lesson 2 suggests four mental processes that enhance listening. Lesson 3 describes the internal and
external obstacles that prevent you from listening effectively. Lesson 4 presents notetaking techniques to improve your ability to remember what you heard. Lesson 5 suggests ways to listen effectively to the many listening opportunities available in today’s media.

No prerequisite courses are needed before beginning this one. To successfully complete this course, all you need are the materials that The Hadley School for the Blind has provided and writing materials in the medium of your choice. For your convenience, each cassette is tone indexed. When fast forwarding or rewinding the cassettes, each new lesson is identified by double beeps. Assignments are indicated by a single beep.

To help you and your instructor determine how effectively you listen, each lesson ends with an assignment. You must submit all five. As you finish each one, mail it in the medium of your choice to
your Hadley instructor at:

The Hadley School for the Blind

700 Elm Street

Winnetka, Illinois 60093

Include your name, address, telephone number, and the name of this course. Assignments in large print, braille, and on audiocassette and computer disk can be mailed in an envelope labeled “Free Matter for the Blind.” If you prefer to fax your assignment, use the cover page that is included with the welcome letter. If you would rather send your assignment electronically, contact your instructor for an e-mail address.

Now, if you’re ready to enhance your listening skills, let’s begin with Lesson 1: What Is Effective Listening?
Lesson 1: What Is Effective Listening?

Listening is an integral part of the communication process. Since the relationship between listener and speaker is an active, dynamic one, good listening skills are critical. What constitutes effective listening? This lesson distinguishes between listening and hearing by explaining the role that each plays in locating, identifying, and interpreting sound. It also identifies three components of effective listening: paying attention to, attaching meaning to, and interpreting content. Finally, this lesson describes the importance of listening—particularly in academic and work settings. Understanding what effective listening entails will enable you to achieve your goal of becoming an effective listener.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, you'll be able to:

a. describe the differences between listening and hearing;
b. identify three components of listening;
c. identify the benefits of listening, particularly in the academic and work settings.

Now if you’re ready to learn the meaning, importance, and benefits of listening, begin Lesson 1.

**Listening Versus Hearing**

Did you know that hearing and listening are two very different processes? Hearing is an automatic response; listening is voluntary. Yet, how you hear sound is an important element in how you listen.

The ear is designed to receive sound. This process begins with sound waves that stimulate the auditory nerve. These are similar to ripples that form when you throw a pebble in the water. The sound waves rise and fall in unexpected directions. The outer ear captures sound waves and sends them to the eardrum, which begins to vibrate. The eardrum separates the outer ear from the middle ear. Its vibrations are transferred to the small bones—the hammer, anvil, and stirrup—located in the middle ear. They, in turn, send vibrations to the
inner ear and to the auditory nerve. The sound then goes to the brain where it is interpreted.

When you listen, however, hearing is enhanced by three fundamental processes that you naturally engage in: locating, identifying, and interpreting sounds. For example, imagine a man hanging a picture on the wall. Once he’s up the ladder, trying to get the picture straight, he drops the nail. When it falls to the floor, his ears help him locate it. The nail ricochets off a table leg, rolls across the linoleum, and comes to rest against a scatter rug. Listening helps him narrow his search so that when he climbs down the ladder, he’ll readily locate the nail.

You may not realize it, but your ears are constantly locating sounds. Suppose you hear something fall in the next room. Before you go to investigate, you probably know where the object fell. To improve your ability to locate sounds, try this experiment. Listen to the sounds around you right now. Perhaps you hear a heated conversation, a bird’s song, or a squeaky door. As you listen, begin to
eliminate the sounds one by one, by selectively focusing on only one sound. Which one do you hear? Now, focus exclusively on a different sound, eliminating all the others. Do it a third time. When you are ready, let all the others back into your sound environment. The more you practice locating sounds, the more proficient you’ll become at identifying differences between sounds.

After you locate a sound, how do you identify it? You are merely detecting or acknowledging its existence when you locate a sound. When you identify it, your auditory memory helps you recall a previous experience with it. Your experience with language enables you to name the sound. Therefore, when you identify sound, you classify and store it in your memory for later use. Try it now. Take a moment and find a comfortable place to sit. Tune in to the sounds around you and try to identify as many sounds as you hear. If you cannot think of the name of the sound, don’t worry. Just take the time to acknowledge hearing it.

When you interpret sound, you are like a detective
gathering data and using your deductive reasoning skills to assess it. In general, locating and interpreting sound go hand in hand. But when you interpret sound, you are doing more than just acknowledging its presence. As you locate and interpret, you assign meaning to the sound. For instance, take a moment to clear your mind of work, people, obligations, or worries. Single out one sound in the environment. What do you hear? Perhaps it’s the leaves of a tree rustling in the wind or your neighbor’s lawn mower. While your auditory memory tries to recall the sound, your brain is busy picking up clues that will help you assess it. For example, when you hear the roar of a lawn mower, you might also smell freshly cut grass. When you hear thunder, you might also feel raindrops on your skin. These examples demonstrate how all your senses search for clues to help you interpret sound.

The sounds you interpret help you assess the environment and enhance your orientation and mobility skills. Your ability to interpret sounds, such as the inflection in someone’s voice,
footsteps several yards behind you, or a particular singer on the radio, can enhance your relationship with others, your level of curiosity, and your safety. Locating, identifying, and interpreting sound are valuable precursors to effective listening.

**Components of Listening**

Each time you listen, you are making a conscious choice to hear what is being said. To use your listening time most effectively, practice these three components:

a. pay attention to the content;
b. attach meaning to the content; and
c. interpret what you hear.

To become an effective listener, pay attention to what you hear. As a dynamic and active participant in the communication process, you hear sounds, then decode and categorize them. When listening at this level, you choose to pay attention. In fact, to accomplish this task, you must want to listen. That is, you must want to reconstruct a message. Effective listeners tell themselves that what they hear is important.
To become an effective listener, you must also attach meaning to what you hear. You must not only want to understand the content, but the speaker's intentions, as well. Think about an occasion when you listened to a speech but grew indifferent or bored. Perhaps you tried to grasp the meaning, but you missed important information. As you develop your ability to concentrate, you will discover techniques to help you attach meaning to the content. These tools will benefit you, whether you’re listening to a sermon, a lecture, or a conversation. You will be less inclined to slip into a casual or half-listening mode. Rather, you will find value in the speaker's message.

Finally, to become an effective listener, you must interpret what you hear. Effective listening entails forming associations between what you hear and what you already know. As you listen, you activate your bank of life experiences. Your prior knowledge is your memory of all the experiences and information you have collected through your life and stored in connected categories. When you activate your bank of prior knowledge, new facts
are integrated with existing knowledge, enabling you to interpret what you’ve heard. For example, listening to a broadcast on infant care might activate your bank of prior knowledge on the topic. You might remember the care your mother gave to a younger sibling. Or, perhaps you’ve had a similar experience with one of your children. As you listen, you grasp the main ideas and supporting details, interpret content, evaluate ideas, as well as determine which new information is useful and which can be discarded.

**Benefits of Effective Listening**

How can you benefit from listening effectively? Studies indicate that the average person spends 70% of the day in some kind of communication activity. Nine percent of that time is involved in writing, reading occupies sixteen percent, and speaking thirty percent. Forty-five percent of the time is devoted to listening. Can you think of different times in the day when you especially need to listen?

In many instances, good listening skills can have
an impact on your life as well as on others. For example, effective listening is imperative if you are a jury member charged with making an important decision, or if your doctor directs you to take a particular medicine. Listening can also be therapeutic for you and for others. A sympathetic ear or an evening of good music can relieve stress and improve your outlook on life. Social workers claim that listening is one of the most valuable tools used in counseling individuals and families.

**Effective Listening in School**

Listening is the first skill a child develops in life. Indeed, children learn to listen before they learn to read or write. In fact, educators explain that listening facilitates all aspects of a child’s development and learning. Listening in childhood, among other things, strengthens reading, writing, and speech skills. Effective listening is a crucial element for success in academics. Effective listeners appear to do better in school than students who do not have effective listening skills. Students trained in effective listening are better able to concentrate and achieve better grades.
Finally, effective listeners use their bank of prior knowledge to help identify relevant or useful content. This helps the listener maintain interest and motivation.

Poor listening skills still abound, however. One University of Minnesota study tested listening skills in several thousand university students. The average student remembered only half of what was heard immediately after hearing it. Two months later, the average listener only remembered about 25% of what was said.

Fortunately, research indicates that you can improve your listening skills. The same university conducted a study that measured student improvement in an effective listening course offered through the adult education department. After meeting once a week for 17 weeks, students doubled their test scores.

Effective Listening in the Workplace

Effective listening is a basic skill for achieving success in the workplace. Demonstrated skill in effective listening enhances quality of service,
group dynamics, staff training, and managerial skills—particularly dialogue between employers and their employees. It may not surprise you to discover that poor or inadequate listening skills are considered one of the most important problems in the workplace. In fact, communication is so critical in the workplace that many business people prefer to communicate in writing, rather than transmit the message verbally. For example, listen to these frequent fliers sitting in an airport lounge discussing a purchase order that’s urgently needed.

Sean: Did you let John know how to prepare the order and where to send it?

Philip: Yeah, this morning.

Sean: How? Did you fax it?

Philip: No, I phoned him.

Sean: Aaaargh! Don't ever depend on John getting anything straight verbally. You've got to put it in writing for him so it will stare him in the face. You'd better get off a fax right now. Say
you are sending it to confirm your phone conversation.

These kinds of concerns have encouraged some companies to set up policies that discourage business taking place through word-of-mouth. One firm furnishes every desk with a memo pad with the inscription, "Don't say it, write it." While there is no harm in backing up an oral report with a written one, your training in effective listening can help you avoid communication problems.

**Summary**

This lesson distinguished between hearing and listening, particularly as they relate to identifying, locating, and interpreting sound. It also identified three components inherent to effective listening. Moreover, it explained how listening skills can benefit you personally, particularly in the classroom and in the business community.

**Assignment 1**

Answer the following questions in the medium of your choice. Begin by writing or stating your full
name, address, and phone number. Also mention the name of this course, Assignment 1, your instructor’s name, and the date.

1. Either inside or outside of your home, walk from one location to another. As you do so, listen to the sounds around you. Locate, identify, and interpret at least five of the sounds that you hear. List them, indicating where you heard them, what they were, and what they signified. For example, while waiting to cross the street, you might have heard an ambulance approaching from the west, which indicated that it was not safe to cross.

2a. Practice paying attention, attaching meaning, and interpreting what you hear by listening to the following scenarios. As you listen to this conversation between two people, identify the name of the restaurant where Molly and Aaron will be dining.

Aaron: Hi Molly. What time will you be leaving work today?

Molly: I think I can get out of here by quarter to six. What do you have in mind?
Aaron: There’s a great Italian restaurant just a block from your office. I could meet you after work, and we could walk to the restaurant together.

Molly: Terrific! I’m in the mood for pasta and salad. What’s the name of the restaurant? I’ll call and make a reservation.

Aaron: It’s called Cucina Fresca. And that’s a good idea. Thursday nights can be crowded.

Molly: Great, I’ll see you later then. By the way, who’s treating?

2b. In the following newscast, identify the top news story of the day:

“Tonight’s news is brought to you by Toyota. Our top story of the hour: The U.S. asks for an end to the salmon blockade. Other headlines include: Tobacco executive admits smoking causes cancer. The hunt intensifies for the man involved in as many as five murders across the U.S. And, scientists today contacted
2c. In the next sports roundup, identify the team that the Atlanta Braves beat. What was the final score?

“The New York Mets had their fifth straight win with 5-3 over the Cincinnati Reds. Olerud hit a sharp single in the 8th. The Atlanta Braves beat the Los Angeles Dodgers, 5-4, on Monday night. Andrew Jones walked to open the ninth inning but was tagged out when pitcher Dreifort fielded a bunt by Eduardo Perez and threw to second. The Braves, who begin a three-game series Tuesday in Chicago, have not had a losing homestand of 10 or more games since going 4-6 June 11, 1995. The San Diego Padres routed the Florida Marlins this week, 10-2.”

2d. In the following weather report, what are the expected high and low temperatures for tomorrow?

“Conditions are good for showers today. A
cool front is headed this way. Showers and thunderstorms are expected late tonight and throughout the day tomorrow. As much as an inch of rain is expected in some areas of Cook and northern Will counties. High tomorrow, 78 degrees; low, 65 degrees.”

3a. How would the following set of directions benefit you if the pharmacist was dispensing this antibiotic to you?

“Store this medicine at room temperature. To clear up the infection completely, you must take this for the full course of ten days. If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible. The possible side effects include diarrhea and some stomach upset. To avoid this, always take this medicine with food. Tell your doctor immediately if you have trouble breathing; experience tightness of the chest; notice swelling of the eyelids, face, or lips; or develop a rash or hives. And discontinue the medicine.”
3b. How would you benefit from hearing this announcement if you regularly took the bus to and from work each day?

“The Lake Street bus will be delayed at least thirty minutes tonight because an accident at the corner of Lake and Halsted earlier in the day is partially blocking the intersection. We’re asking all passengers for their full cooperation because this problem will persist through the rush hour.”

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send it electronically.

This is the end of Lesson 1, What Is Effective Listening?