

You Don't Know How to Listen

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ● AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Or do you? Good listening is an art, but anyone can acquire it with concentration and practice. Here's how to recognize your shortcomings—and what to do about them

By DR. RALPH NICHOLS
with LEONARD A. STEVENS

THE farmer at the other end of the telephone line in Streetman, Texas, sounded excited. He told the operator that a car driven by two men had just run off the road near his home. He had gone for a team to pull the auto out of the ditch, but when he returned, the two men had disappeared. Looking around the area, he stumbled across a Missouri license plate and a couple of guns hidden in the brush nearby.

"What'll I do?" he demanded. "Tell me what the men looked like," the operator said. After the farmer had described the two men, she rang the sheriff's office. Before going on duty, she told the law officer, she'd heard a news broadcast. Six Springfield, Missouri, police officers had been shot to death. The broadcast had described the killers, the operator said, and the descriptions fitted the two men who had ditched the car in Streetman.

Thanks to the telephone operator's tip, police caught up with the two fugitives in Houston, Texas, and surrounded them. Rather than submit to capture, the men killed themselves. And when police inspected the bodies, they found the telephone operator had been right; the two men were indeed the killers.

If the telephone operator had not been a good listener, the two killers might have escaped. Chances are that most of us wouldn't have remembered the descriptions even if we'd heard the radio broadcast. Why? Because our ability to comprehend and remember what is told us is far more limited than you probably suspect.

For the last several years, I have been testing the ability of people to understand and remember what they hear. At the University of Minnesota, we have examined the listening ability of several thousand students and, more recently, that of scores of business and professional people in adult-education courses. In each case, the person tested listened to short talks by various faculty members and was examined for his grasp of the content. Each listener was also given a carefully constructed standard test to find out how well he learned from what he heard.

These extensive tests have led me to this general conclusion:

Immediately after the average person has listened to someone talk, he remembers only about half of what he has heard—no matter how carefully he thought he listened.

What happens as time passes? My own testing shows—and it has been substantiated by reports of research at Florida State University, Michigan State College and elsewhere—that two months after listening to a person talk, the average listener will remember only about 25 per cent of what was said.

Well, is that bad? It is, and for a number of reasons. But fortunately there are ways in which you can markedly improve your listening ability. I say "fortunately" because the odds are that your thinking is influenced more through what you hear than what you learn through any other means of personal communication.

Whether you're a housewife or governor of your state, you probably depend on listening far more than you suspect.

A few years ago, a friend of mine decided to find out how much time he spent on his job just listening to other people. He is Ernest H. Ulm, sales manager for the electronics division of Sylvania Electric Products, Inc. At that time, his work required a lot of telephoning, so for one week he had his secretary log the time he spent on the telephone. The secretary found that Ulm spent between 70 and 80 per cent of his working day telephoning, and probably half that time listening. In other words, he received 35 to 40 per cent of his salary for just listening.

A survey completed in 1929—possibly the only survey of its kind—indicated that all of us do approximately the same amount of listening as Ulm. Paul T. Rankin, who was supervising director of research and adjustment for the Detroit Public Schools, studied the personal communications of 68 persons with different occupations to determine the percentage of time they spent talking, reading, writing and listening. For approximately two months, the 68 kept tabs on these

Can good listening be taught? The answer is yes.

Instruction increases an average pupil's proficiency 25 per cent

1. Science says you think four times faster than a person usually talks to you. Do you use this excess time to turn your thoughts elsewhere while you are keeping general track of a conversation?



2. Do you listen primarily for facts, rather than ideas, when someone is speaking?



3. Do certain words, phrases or ideas so prejudice you against the speaker that you cannot listen objectively to what is being said?



4. When you are puzzled or annoyed by what someone says, do you try to get the question straightened out immediately—either in your own mind or by interrupting the speaker?



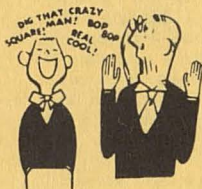
5. If you feel that it would take too much time and effort to understand something, do you go out of your way to avoid hearing about it?



6. Do you deliberately turn your thoughts to other subjects when you believe a speaker will have nothing particularly interesting to say?



7. Can you tell by a person's appearance and delivery that he won't have anything worth while to say?



8. When somebody is talking to you, do you try to make him think you're paying attention when you're not?



9. When you're listening to someone, are you easily distracted by outside sights and sounds?



10. If you want to remember what someone is saying, do you think it a good idea to write it down as he goes along?



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If you answer "no" to all these questions, then you are that rare individual—the perfect listener. Every "yes" answer means that you are guilty of a specific bad listening habit



Dr. Ralph Nichols, coauthor of this article, is professor of speech at U. of Minnesota. He pioneered in the teaching of good listening and is a leading authority on the subject

activities every 15 minutes of their waking days. Rankin found they spent 9 per cent of their communicating time writing, 16 per cent reading, 30 per cent talking and 45 per cent listening.

Although the survey indicated we spend almost three times as much time listening as reading—the other important means by which we receive information—little attention is given to training people how to listen. In the Detroit schools, Rankin discovered that reading received 52 per cent of the emphasis in classroom instruction, and listening only 8 per cent.

An Important Quality in Executives

The need for better listening techniques is also recognized by people in industry. Dr. Earl Planty, executive counselor for the pharmaceutical firm of Johnson & Johnson at New Brunswick, New Jersey, says: "By far the most effective method by which executives can tap ideas of subordinates is sympathetic listening in the many day-to-day informal contacts within and outside the work place. There is no full-blown system that will do the job in an easier manner. . . Nothing can equal an executive's willingness to hear."

Sometimes big executives discover this truth the hard way. Not long ago, the managers of a large East Coast industrial firm came to work on a Monday morning to find the plant surrounded by pickets. It was almost a complete surprise. Labor negotiations had been under way, but the top management had no idea a strike was impending; in fact, it was the first strike in the plant's history. What had happened?

It developed that the firm's director of labor relations had warned a member of the top management that a strike was possible and had recommended action to prevent it. But nothing was done. The firm lost five days of valuable production before a settlement was reached.

Later, the management member who had been warned said his immediate reaction to the recommendations of the director of labor relations had

been that "a strike couldn't happen here!" With that thought in mind, he ceased to listen and never really learned the seriousness of the warning.

Workers in industry need to be good listeners, too. Failure to pay attention to what is told them can be costly, even fatal. When a Long Island, New York, plant hired a number of new employees a couple of years ago to work over a forge used for heating tool steel, a meeting was held to instruct them verbally in the use of grappling irons. The men used the irons, with removable wooden handles, to hold the steel in the forge. When a man finished with a hot grappling iron, the instructor said, he was to hang it on the wall to the right of the forge. As the irons cooled, they were to be moved to the left wall. And when an employee needed a grappling iron, he of course would take it from the left wall.

Shortly after the meeting, an employee hung a hot grappling iron on the wrong wall. Another man walked into the room, reached up and grabbed the hot iron. The metal burned and stuck to the skin of his hand. Unable to let go, he fainted and fell, with the grappling iron still stuck to his hand. The burns impaired the man's ability to work for the remainder of his life.

He Was Present But He Didn't Hear

At a hearing after the accident, the man who had placed the iron on the wrong wall swore that he hadn't heard anybody say hot irons were to be hung to the right of the forge. However, other employees testified he was present when the instructions were given.

I'm sure the guilty man was telling the truth—that although he attended the meeting, his mind was somewhere else at the critical moment. He was not unlike the average man in this respect. And, like most of us, he probably never realized the real reason he didn't hear was that he was a poor listener.

The forge incident was sudden and tragic. But the results of bad listening habits show up most

often in little incidents that accumulate day to day, like the one told me by a Minneapolis sales manager. He said: "I sent a man down to Chicago with explicit instructions as to what he was to do when he got there. I even asked him to repeat these instructions to make sure he understood them. Yet, as soon as he arrived in Chicago he telephoned me to ask, 'Now, let's see, chief, what was it I was to do first off?' That's the kind of business that costs plenty of time and money!"

At best, that salesman had sacrificed his prospects of promotion; at worst, he might be fired. And regrettably his case is not unusual, particularly among young people just starting out in business. "One big difficulty with new, inexperienced sales clerks is that they don't listen," John J. McGrath, manager of training for Macy's department stores in the New York area, told me.

Sales Clerk Ignores Sleeve Length

"Here's what an inexperienced clerk often does: a customer steps to the counter and says, 'I want that blouse on display there. I'd like size 14 with short sleeves.' The clerk hears only: 'Blouse on display. Size 14.' She rushes away and brings back a blouse, size 14, but with long sleeves. The customer again explains, 'Short sleeves.' Back goes the clerk, and again the customer waits.

"In a store the size of ours, such incidents can run into money. There's useless work for the clerk, unnecessary handling of merchandise and, more important, possibly an irritated customer. That's why in our training we stress, 'Listen before you act.'"

Maybe you're not a professional salesman, but at least from time to time you have to sell yourself—to your employer, your business associates, your neighbors. And essentially the problem boils down to: How can you sell yourself if you don't know what the prospective buyer wants? Good listening is an excellent way to find out.

Personally, I feel that good listening is also a compliment to the person speaking and can make for better relations all around. The very act of sympathetic, comprehensive listening will often help solve another person's problems, as social workers discovered long ago. Dr. Florence Hollis, professor of social work at the New York School of Social Work, Columbia University, puts it this way: "When a person knows that he has a good listener to talk to, he'll share his thoughts more fully, which, in turn, makes it easier for the caseworker to help him with his problems. And, moreover, as he talks, the person needing help often finds a good solution to his problems himself."

In the home, good listening can help a husband understand his wife better, a parent understand a child better. It also can pay big dividends in other ways. In Glenmont, New York, last year, Mrs. Claire Henry listened to her husband talk shop about his telephone-company job. Later she saw a trenching machine scoop a five-foot ditch across a nearby piece of property. Because she had listened well, she knew that the machine was approaching a vital telephone cable. Her prompt warning prevented the cutting of the cable, which carried 3,000 important telephone and telegraph circuits and two television channels. The telephone company rewarded her with a four-day visit to New York for her whole family.

Can you improve your listening? The answer definitely is "yes." Listening can be taught. We are doing it every day at the University of Minnesota, and listening training also has been added to the curriculums of more than a score of colleges and universities all across the country, including Stephens College, Florida State University, Michigan State College and the University of Denver. Public-school systems all the way from the Carolinas to California likewise have inaugurated listening training programs; those in

Nashville, Tennessee, and Phoenix, Arizona, are outstanding examples.

As to the effectiveness of the training, no group we have ever trained has averaged less than a 25 per cent gain in listening proficiency. And young students aren't the only people who can improve their listening. Although college freshmen make statistically significant gains, I have found that adult groups do even better.

Our comparative studies and interviews with hundreds of persons have disclosed 10 bad habits working almost universally against good listening. Here are short explanations of each bad habit and suggestions as to what can be done about it:

1. Hop-Skip-and-Jump Listening.

The average person talks at a speed of about 125 words per minute. There is good evidence that if thought were measured in words per minute, most of us could think easily at about four times that rate. And it's very difficult—almost painful—to try to slow down our thinking speed. Therefore, we have about 400 words of thinking time to spare every minute a person talks to us.

What do you do with your excess thinking time while someone is speaking to you? Suppose you're a poor listener. Well, you start to listen all right, but then you unconsciously realize there's time to spare. So your thoughts turn to something else for a moment, then rush back to the speaker. These brief side excursions of thought continue until your mind carries too long on some enticing but irrelevant subject. Then, when your thoughts return to the person talking, you find he's got ahead of you. Now it's harder to follow him and easier for your mind to take those side excursions. Finally you give up; the person is still talking, but your mind is in another world.

The good listener avoids these mental excursions. He uses his thought speed to advantage; he constantly applies his spare thinking time to what is being said. It isn't easy unless you have a definite pattern of thought to follow, and to develop such a pattern you should:

- Try to anticipate what a person is going to talk about. On the basis of what he's already said, ask yourself: "What's he trying to get at? What point is he going to make?"
- Mentally summarize what the person has been saying. What point has he made already, if any?
- Weigh the speaker's evidence by mentally questioning it. If he tells you facts, illustrative stories and statistics, ask yourself: "Are they accurate? Do they come from an unprejudiced source? Am I getting the full picture, or is he telling me only what will prove his point?"
- Listen "between the lines." A person doesn't always put everything that's important into words. The changing tones and volume of his voice may have a meaning. So may his facial expressions, the gestures he makes with his hands, the movement of his body.

2. "I-Get-the-Facts" Listening.

Do you ever say, "When I listen, I really get the facts"? If so, you're a poor listener.

Let's say your boss is giving you instructions made up of facts that we'll label A to Z. The boss begins to talk. You hear fact A and think: I've got to remember it! So you begin a memory exercise by repeating "Fact A, fact A, fact A . . ."

Meanwhile, the boss is telling you fact B. Now you've got two facts to memorize. You're so busy doing it that you miss fact C completely. And so it goes up to fact Z. You catch a few facts, garble several others and completely miss the rest.

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If you were a good listener, you'd have listened for main ideas. As facts are spoken to you, weigh one against the other; try to recognize their relationship to one another. Soon you will realize that the person talking has put several facts together to make a central idea; go after ideas, not a series of memorized facts.

3. Emotional Deaf Spots.

For most of us, there are words and phrases that upset us emotionally. They impair our listening. Suppose your firm's accountant comes to you and says: "I have just heard from the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and . . ." You suddenly breathe harder and think: That blasted bureau! Can't they leave me alone? You have stopped listening to the accountant. Meanwhile, he is saying that there's a chance you can save \$300 this year if you go about it right. But you don't hear how, because the words "internal revenue" have inflicted an emotional deaf spot.

Something of the kind happens to all of us. An ardent Republican, for example, may go temporarily deaf on hearing the name Harry Truman, and plenty of Democrats are deafened by the

practice because ultimately you'll find yourself unable to escape listening to something difficult; then the effort will seem unbearable and you'll be unable to listen effectively.

The solution: listen to discussions of subjects that require effort to understand as, for example, in radio commentaries or panel discussions.

6. The Premature Dismissal of a Subject as Uninteresting.

When a person starts talking, you may feel it takes too much effort to concentrate on what he's got to say, so you think: He has nothing interesting to say. You close your mind to his words and your thoughts wander to more fascinating topics.

To remedy this bad listening habit, I suggest a selfish approach. Maybe the subject is uninteresting, but even the most boring person ordinarily has some idea to offer. Be selfish and seize for yourself whatever ideas he contributes.

7. Criticizing a Speaker's Delivery and Physical Appearance.

Suppose a man stops to tell you something that will benefit you. If his shoes are shabby and he lisps when he talks, you may think: Anyone who doesn't shine his shoes and who speaks with a lisp can't have much to say. The man might be giving you the key to a lifetime of success, but you're not listening.

If you must be mentally critical of clothing, or the lack of melodious tones, wait until the person is through talking.

8. Pretending Attention.

"If I simply appear to be listening, everything is okay!" you say. You make yourself comfortable, turn two glassy, unblinking eyes toward the speaker—and you don't hear a thing.

Actually you are fooling only yourself. You'll seldom fool the person talking, because listening requires an expenditure of energy which is recognized at least unconsciously by him. And furthermore, you're faking yourself out of an opportunity to learn from what is being said. So you'd better stop the pretense and really listen.

9. Yielding to Distractions.

We live in a noisy age—the distracting hubbub of modern civilization is all around us. We are distracted not only by what we hear, but by what we see. If you are a poor listener, these distractions will drag your mind away from what someone is telling you.

A good listener fights these distractions. Sometimes the fight is easily won—by closing a door, shutting off the radio, moving closer to the person talking, or asking him to speak louder. If the distractions can't be licked that easily, then it's a matter of concentration. Keep your mind busy with what the speaker is saying.

10. Pencil-and-Paper Listening.

Some people think that the way to learn from listening is to take a lot of notes. They become involved in the physical act of writing. Often they try to outline what a person is saying and become wrapped up in symbols and numbers. Meanwhile, they're only "half listening."

If you have this habit, I suggest you drop the pencil. If you feel that something must be written down, first listen and afterward write down, in just a few words, the main points made by the person talking.

In fact, if you are guilty of any of these 10 bad listening habits, you'll find it well worth your while to try the remedies I have listed. A good listener is a better friend, a more thoughtful spouse and a more efficient worker. ▲▲▲

How to Practice Good Listening

• You can be a better listener if you devote time and practice to it. Just knowing what your bad listening habits are is not enough. Here's what you can do:

Begin a program of regular practice to develop your concentration, the most important aid to good listening. For one minute of every hour, try to give your fullest listening attention to a person talking, even if it's a four-year-old child. If there is no voice to hear, select a sound—an airplane overhead, a bird's song, a church bell, the hum of a machine. But whatever you choose to listen to, put everything else out of your mind and concentrate on that sound to the exclusion of all others. Such concentration will be harder than you think, but it will greatly improve your listening proficiency.

Then have members of your family take turns reading from a magazine, a book or a newspaper—and listen carefully. To test how well you listened, discuss with the others what you heard and remembered. You also can test yourself and your family in the same way after listening to a radio commentary or a television panel program.

Practice may not make you a perfect listener, but it can make you a good listener. It'll pay off in better understanding, closer friendships, increased efficiency—perhaps even a salary increase.

name Robert A. Taft. Other words that I'm sure cause emotional deaf spots in many include landlord, red tape, sex, vivisection and Communist.

For better listening, watch your reaction to such words. Identify the ones that bother you and analyze them to find out why they upset you. A thorough examination will usually reveal that they really shouldn't bother you at all.

4. Supersensitive Listening.

If you've developed deep-seated opinions or prejudices, a person talking to you may well unwittingly stamp verbally on your mental toes. When he does, you unconsciously stop listening to him. You try to interrupt him, you plan an embarrassing question, or you mull over a scathing rebuttal. Meanwhile, the person continues talking, and you miss his main points.

The solution? Use self-control and always listen a person out. When he's finished, then plan your questions or rebuttal.

5. Avoiding Difficult Explanations.

Do you go out of your way to keep out of earshot of anything that is difficult to understand? There are plenty of people who do. It's a bad