

## Stages of Listening

**Brief:** The listening process, which is essential to successful public speaking, involves five stages: receiving, understanding, evaluating, remembering, and responding.

**Learning Objective:** Understand why listening is an important skill for public speaking and identify the five stages of listening.

**Key Terms:**

- **Attending:** The process of accurately identifying particular sounds we hear as words.
- **Comprehension:** Understanding the totality of intentions or attributes, characters, marks, properties, or qualities, that an object possesses.
- **Evaluate:** To determine, estimate, or judge the value of; to assess.
- **Hearing:** The physiological process of registering sound waves as they hit the eardrum.
- **Listening:** The active process by which we make sense of, assess, and respond to what we hear.

### What Does Listening Have To Do with Public Speaking?

You might be asking yourself, “What does listening have to do with public speaking?” To deliver an effective speech, you need to tailor your content to your audience. The only way to do that is to listen to representative members of the audience, listen to the language they use, and listen to what is most important to them.

### *What is Listening?*

Listening is a skill of critical significance in all aspects of our lives—from maintaining our personal relationships, to getting our jobs done, to taking notes in class, to figuring out which bus to take to the airport. To be a successful listener, it’s important to understand that listening involves more than just hearing the words that are directed at us. Listening is an active process by which we make sense of, assess, and respond to what we hear.



The listening process involves five stages: receiving, understanding, evaluating, remembering, and responding. An effective listener must hear and identify the speech sounds directed toward them, understand the message of those sounds, critically evaluate or assess that message, remember what’s been said, and respond (either verbally or nonverbally) to information they’ve received.

## **Stages of Listening**

### ***The Receiving Stage***

The first stage of the listening process is the receiving stage, which involves hearing and attending. Hearing is the physiological process of registering sound waves as they hit the eardrum. As obvious as it may seem, in order to effectively gather information through listening, we must first be able to physically hear what we're listening to. If we have a hearing impairment, our ability to listen will be challenged. Excessive noise in the environment can create obstacles to receiving audible sound waves.

Paired with hearing, attending is the other half of the receiving stage in the listening process. Attending is the process of accurately identifying and interpreting particular sounds we hear as words. The sounds we hear have no meaning until we give them their meaning in context. Listening is an active process that constructs meaning from both verbal and nonverbal messages.

Attending also involves being able to discern human speech, also known as speech segmentation. Identifying auditory stimuli as speech but not being able to break those speech sounds down into sentences and words would be a failure of the listening process.

### ***The Understanding Stage***

The understanding stage is the stage during which the listener determines the context and meanings of the words that are heard through a process called decoding. Understanding or comprehension occurs when the listener's determination of the context and meanings of the words matches the speaker's message. One tactic for better understanding a speaker's meaning is to ask questions to fill in any holes you may have in the mental reconstruction of the speaker's message.

### ***The Evaluating Stage***

This stage of the listening process is the one during which the listener assesses the information they received, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Evaluating allows the listener to form an opinion of what they heard and, if necessary, to begin developing a response.

The evaluating stage occurs most effectively once the listener fully understands what the speaker is trying to say. Having a clear understanding of a speaker's message allows a listener to evaluate that message without getting bogged down in ambiguities or spending unnecessary time and energy addressing points that may be tangential or otherwise nonessential.

### ***The Remembering Stage***

In the listening process, the remembering stage occurs as the listener categorizes and retains the information he or she has gathered from the speaker for future access. If the listener has been attending, understanding, and evaluating, chances are the result will be stored memory—allowing the listener to record information about people, objects, and events for later recall. This happens both during and after the speaker’s delivery.

### ***The Responding Stage***

The responding stage is the stage of the listening process in which the listener provides verbal and/or nonverbal reactions based on short- or long-term memory.

Nonverbal responses such as nodding or eye contact allow the listener to communicate his or her level of interest without interrupting the speaker, thereby preserving the speaker/listener roles. When a listener responds verbally to what they hear and remember—for example, with a question or a comment—the speaker/listener roles are reversed, at least momentarily.

### **From Concept to Action**

Think of a time when you were present at a public speaking event, only to discover later that you didn’t remember much about the content of the speech. Reflect on why you failed to remember. Maybe you were distracted by your own internal thoughts and didn’t fully attend to what the speaker was saying? Maybe there was physical noise in the environment that blocked your ability to hear? Maybe the speaker used technical language that you didn’t understand? Or, maybe you started the process of evaluating the speech too early in the presentation and were distracted from receiving the entirety of the speaker’s message? What can you do to make sure that you remember more effectively in the future?

#### **OER IMAGE SOURCES:**

“Left Ear Hear Human Biology Conch Cup.” Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/vectors/left-ear-hear-human-biology-conch-308715>. Accessed 22 March 2019. [CC0]

#### **OER TEXT SOURCES:**

“Understanding Listening.” Lumen Learning. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-communications/chapter/understanding-listening>. Accessed 22 March 2019. [CC BY-SA 4.0]

#### **REFERENCES:**

Wyeth, Sims. “To Be a Better Speaker Be a Better Listener.” Inc.com. <https://www.inc.com/sims-wyeth/to-be-better-speaker-be-better-listener.html>. Accessed 22 March 2019.