

Overcome Obstacles to Listening

Brief: To be an effective listener, you must learn how to resist distractions so you can better focus on what you are trying to hear.

Learning Objective: Identify the types of listening distractions and know how to overcome them.

Key Terms:

- External distractions: Auditory and visual barriers, also known as “noise,” that inhibit effective listening.
- Internal distractions: Psychological and emotional noise that inhibit effective listening.
- Technological distractions: Improperly used technology that inhibits effective listening.

Resisting Distraction

Distractions can come in all shapes and sizes. To be an effective listener, you must learn how to resist distractions so you can better focus on what you are trying to hear.

Auditory and visual distractions are the most easily identifiable types of distractions, known as external distractions, that can inhibit effective listening. Think about trying to have a meaningful conversation with a friend while someone else is watching an action movie in the same room. Pretty impossible, right?



Internal distractions refer to psychological and emotional noise. Distractions can originate internally or can be physical responses to the environment, such as feeling hungry, tired, or cold. If you're nervous about presenting a speech, you may have a litany of negative thoughts in your inner monologue. Internal distractions also occur when you're thinking about plans for after your speech, or thinking about topics and things completely unrelated to the speech at hand.

Technological Distractions

Everyone has experienced the benefits technology can provide to the listening experience. Hearing aid technology can help those who are hard of hearing more easily engage in a conversation or listen to a lecture. Electronic presentations can incorporate photographs, sounds, charts, guided outlines, and other features to help maintain audience attention and

clarify or demonstrate complicated ideas. An engaged audience member is more likely to pay attention to the material and therefore listen more actively to a presentation.

When not used properly, however, technology can become a barrier to effective listening. Poor or outdated equipment can malfunction, causing disruptions to the listening process. If a conversation is taking place via an electronic medium, problems with technology (like a buzzing phone line or slow Internet connection) can likewise limit communication. In a non-virtual setting, excessive or unnecessary audio/visual components to a technological presentation can become distracting, particularly if they are directly related to the message being communicated by the person making the presentation.

Beyond technology being utilized by the presenter, technology used by the listener can also hinder effective listening. Taking lecture notes on a laptop is convenient, but it is also convenient to check Facebook or the latest sports scores. Cell phones and tablets can provide similar distractions. If someone in the audience is talking or texting during the speech, technology becomes a major distraction for everyone involved.

Ultimately, both the speaker and the listener need to anticipate potential technological problems or distractions to the listening process, and to do what they can to eliminate or mitigate their effects.

Speakers can avoid distractions caused by technology by doing the following:

- Before the presentation, the speaker should silence his or her cell phone or any other device that might make noise and provide an interruption.
- Before the speech, the speaker should do a test run to make sure that everything is set up properly to avoid malfunction later during the speech.
- Amplified or not, at the beginning of the speech, the speaker should ask, “Can you hear me in the back?”
- Keep it simple. Using too many sources of visual stimulation such as visual aids, PowerPoints, charts, laser pointers, etc., can cause message overload for the audience as they try to divide their attention between what they hear and what they see.

From Concept to Action

What time of day do you find it the most difficult to listen? First thing in the morning before you’ve fully woken up? After lunch when you’re digesting your meal? When you’re hungry before dinner? Or, later in the day when all you want to do is relax? We each have physiological biorhythms that can cause internal distractions and get in the way of effective communication. Understanding our own daily cycles can help us understand when we’ll have to work a little harder to be at our best.

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