

# Causes of Poor Listening

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the reasons behind ineffective listening. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Causes of Poor Listening
2. Low Concentration
3. Lack of Prioritization
4. Poor Judgement
5. Focusing on Style, Not Substance

## 1. Causes of Poor Listening

The act of listening may be affected by barriers that impede the flow of information. These barriers include distractions, an inability to prioritize information, a tendency to assume or judge based on little or no information (i.e., "jumping to conclusions), and general confusion about the topic being discussed.

Listening barriers may be psychological (e.g., the listener's emotions) or physical (e.g., noise and visual distraction). However, some of the most common barriers to effective listening include:

- Low concentration
- Lack of prioritization
- Poor judgement
- Focusing on style rather than substance

## 2. Low Concentration

Low concentration, or not paying close attention to speakers, is detrimental to effective listening. It can result from various psychological or physical situations such as:

- Visual or auditory distractions
- Physical discomfort
- Inadequate volume
- Lack of interest in the subject material

- Stress
- Personal bias

Regardless of the cause, when a listener is not paying attention to a speaker's dialogue, effective communication is significantly diminished. Both listeners and speakers should be aware of these kinds of impediments and work to eliminate or mitigate them.

When listening to speech, there is a time delay between the time a speaker utters a sentence to the moment the listener comprehends the speaker's meaning. Normally, this happens within the span of a few seconds. If this process takes longer, the listener has to catch up to the speaker's words if he or she continues to speak at a pace faster than the listener can comprehend.

Often, it is easier for listeners to stop listening when they do not understand. Therefore, a speaker needs to know which parts of a speech may be more comprehension intensive than others, and adjust his or her speed, vocabulary, and sentence structure accordingly.

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### 3. Lack of Prioritization

Just as lack of attention to detail in a conversation can lead to ineffective listening, so can focusing too much attention on the least important information.

Listeners need to be able to pick up on social cues and prioritize the information they hear to identify the most important points within the context of the conversation.

Often, the information the audience needs to know is delivered along with less pertinent or irrelevant information. When listeners give equal weight to everything they hear, it makes it difficult to organize and retain the information they need.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Students who take notes in class must know which information to write down within the context of an entire lecture. Writing down the lecture word for word is impossible as well as inefficient.

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### 4. Poor Judgement

When listening to a speaker's message, it is common to sometimes overlook aspects of the conversation or make judgments before all of the information is presented.

Listeners often engage in **confirmation bias**, which is the tendency to isolate aspects of a conversation to support one's own preexisting beliefs and values. This psychological process has a detrimental effect on listening for several reasons.

First, confirmation bias tends to cause listeners to enter the conversation before the speaker finishes her message and, thus, form opinions without first obtaining all pertinent information. Second, confirmation bias detracts from a listener's ability to make accurate critical assessments.

➦ **EXAMPLE** A listener may hear something at the beginning of a speech that arouses a specific emotion. Whether anger, frustration, or anything else, this emotion could have a profound impact on the

listener's perception of the rest of the conversation.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Confirmation Bias

The tendency to pick out aspects of a conversation that support our one's own preexisting beliefs and values.

## 5. Focusing on Style, Not Substance

The **vividness effect** explains how vivid or highly graphic an individual's perception of a situation. When observing an event in person, an observer is automatically drawn toward the sensational, vivid or memorable aspects of a conversation or speech.

In the case of listening, distracting or larger-than-life elements in a speech or presentation can deflect attention away from the most important information in the conversation or presentation. These distractions can also influence the listener's opinion.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If a Shakespearean professor delivered an entire lecture in an exaggerated Elizabethan accent, the class would likely not take the professor seriously, regardless of the actual academic merit of the lecture.

Cultural differences (including speakers' accents, vocabulary, and misunderstandings due to cultural assumptions) can also obstruct the listening process. The same biases apply to the speaker's physical appearance. To avoid this obstruction, listeners should be aware of these biases and focus on the substance, rather than the style of delivery, or the speaker's voice and appearance.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Vividness Effect

The phenomenon of how vivid or highly graphic and dramatic events affect an individual's perception of a situation.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about several **causes of poor listening**. First, **low concentration** can be the result of various psychological or physical situations such as visual or auditory distractions, physical discomfort, inadequate volume, lack of interest in the subject material, stress, or personal bias. Additionally, when listeners **fail to prioritize** what they hear, it is difficult for them to organize and retain the information they need. When the audience is trying too hard to listen, they often cannot take in the most important information they need.

Jumping ahead can be detrimental to the listening experience; when listening to a speaker's message, the audience overlooks aspects of the conversation or makes judgments before all of the information is presented. **Poor judgement** is often connected to confirmation bias, or the tendency to pick out aspects of a conversation that support one's own preexisting beliefs and values. Finally, a flashy speech can actually be more detrimental to the overall success and comprehension of the message because it **focuses on style over substance**. Recognizing obstacles ahead of time can go a

long way toward overcoming them.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Confirmation Bias**

The tendency to pick out aspects of a conversation that support our one's own preexisting beliefs and values.

### **Vividness Effect**

The phenomenon of how vivid or highly graphic and dramatic events affect an individual's perception of a situation.