**Listening is the communication skill used most but taught the least.**

1. The average rate of speech for most Americans is about 125 wpm. However, this rate is slow for the human brain, which can comprehend about 600 wpm. This means that as we listen we continue thinking at a high speed, while the spoken word arrives at low speed. The use or misuse of this “spare thinking time” holds the answer to how well a person can concentrate on the spoken word.

2. Listening is our primary communication activity. Studies show that we spend about 80% of our waking hours communicating. According to research, at least 45% of that time is spent listening. In schools, students spend 60-70% of their classroom time listening. In business, listening has often been cited as the most critical managerial skill.

3. There are three crucial parts to listening, in addition to hearing. There’s the interrelation of what was heard that leads to understanding, or misunderstanding. Then there is the evaluation stage, where the listener weighs the information and decides how to use it. Finally, the listener reacts to what was heard and how he or she evaluated it.

4. Our listening habits are not the result of training but rather the result of the lack of it. This chart shows the order in which the four basic communication skills are learned, the degree to which they are used, and the extent to which they are taught.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learned . . .</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used . . .</td>
<td>Most (45%)</td>
<td>Next Most (30%)</td>
<td>Next Least (16%)</td>
<td>Least (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught . . .</td>
<td>Least</td>
<td>Next Least</td>
<td>Next Most</td>
<td>Most</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS?**

1. **Think ahead of the talker.**
   A good listener thinks ahead of the talker, trying to anticipate what the oral discourse is leading to and what conclusions will be drawn from the words spoken at the moment.

2. **Weigh the evidence.**
   Good listeners weigh the evidence used by talkers to support the points they make. Good listeners ask themselves, “Is this evidence valid? Is it the complete evidence?”

3. **Review and summarize the main points.**
   Periodically a good listener reviews and mentally summarizes the points of the lecture thus far.

4. **Pay attention to nonverbal communication.**
   Throughout the talk or lecture, a good listener “listens between the lines” in search of meaning that is not necessarily put into spoken words. He asks, “Is the talker playing this point up or down, and why is he doing so?”
5. **Listen for ideas.**
   When professors lecture, they want listeners to understand their ideas. The facts are useful primarily for constructing the ideas. A good listener concentrates on understanding those ideas. The ideas can help the listener remember the supporting facts more effectively than listening only for facts.

6. **Develop tonal listening skills.**
   Tonal listening is especially helpful in one-way listening situations. When attending a lecture, noticing the auditory subtleties will help the listener stay interested in the topic and understand the information because it provides an exercise for the mind.

   Here are some ways to sharpen tonal listening skills:
   - Concentrate on the pitch of the voice, pauses, breathing, and tenor of the “ummm” and “ohhh” sounds.
   - Listen for repeated words and the emphasis each gets.
   - Watch for personal references that may have hidden significance. “I forgot to include that part in the outline” might mean that the instructor is not interested in the omitted part.
   - Notice when and how the speaker laughs. Keep track of likes and dislikes.

7. **Try these listening tips:**
   - Resist distractions. Concentrate on what is being said, not what’s happening around you.
   - Be an opportunist. Find areas of shared interest between you and the speaker.
   - Ask yourself, “What’s in this for me?”
   - Stay alert. Avoid daydreaming if a speaker’s delivery is slow. When your thoughts run ahead of the speaker’s words, use the time to evaluate, anticipate, and review what is being said.
   - Identify the speaker’s purpose and adapt to it. Ask yourself if the aim of the speaker is to inform, persuade, or entertain.
   - Listen for central themes rather than for isolated facts.
   - Plan to report what you hear to someone else - within eight hours.
   - Develop your note-taking skills.
   - As a listener, take primary responsibility for successful two-way communication. Don’t just depend on the speaker.

*(Adapted from the Learning Resources Center at Hudson Valley Community College, Troy, NY)*