

LEARNING TO LISTEN



BY WILLIAM H. ARMSTRONG

At least in pedagogical circles, the art of listening seems to have gotten itself inseparably attached to an image of passivity, and the phrase "passive listening" makes frequent appearance in our educational lexicon. This leaves the impression that when one is listening, one is not doing anything. Too bad, because as the following essay makes clear, effective listening is not only one of the most important methods for acquiring knowledge, it is also perhaps the hardest, most active work any learner is called upon to do.

Mr. Armstrong's commentary and practical advice are written for a student audience and might make good reading at the beginning of each year or semester. To our modern ear, his suggestions may have a quaint quality, based as they are on the old-fashioned idea that learning is hard work, that it is students' "basic obligation" to assume that work—even when they don't "feel" like it—and that not much learning can take place until they do. Mr. Armstrong's uncompromising insistence on the self-discipline required by students (and the satisfaction and self-fulfillment they will reap from it) reminds us of the necessity for balance in the learning equation. Teachers' efforts to make lessons more effective must be joined by an effort on the part of students to become better learners. Learning to listen is a good place to start.

—EDITOR

It is paradoxical that listening is the easiest way to learn but the hardest study skill to master.

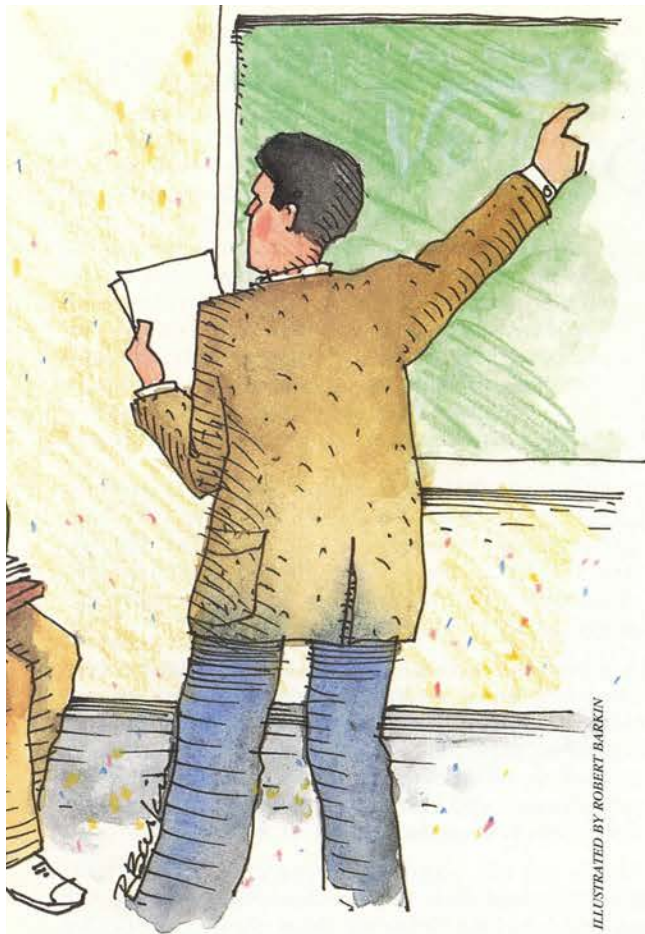
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If you love to listen you will gain knowledge, and if you incline your ear you will become wise.—SIRACH

Interest Measurement Test

1. Do you hear the names of people who are introduced to you?
2. Are you waiting to listen when your teacher begins to speak or do you miss the beginning remarks?
3. Are you thinking of what you are going to say next while someone is speaking to you?
4. Are you addicted to the fatal belief that you can listen to two things at once?
5. Have you ever consciously tested yourself to see

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ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT BARZUN

how much you can remember of what is said to you?

If the answer to each of these questions is an honest "No," you need not despair. You can console yourself that you are with the great majority. You can also resolve to train yourself to listen and be successful in the training.

While listening is the easiest and quickest of all the ways to learn, learning to listen—and to use listening as one of the most effective of all the learning processes—is the hardest of all the learning processes to master. Your teachers have been able to help you learn to read and to think, but it is almost impossible for the teacher to give more than awareness-aid to the process of listening. It must be almost wholly self-taught. It was not emphasized in your early training; it is the least susceptible of all the learning processes to discipline; and it is never accomplished except by active and continued practice. Few ever achieve it, but those who do are counted among the students who learn the most and the persons in society most desirable to know.

Now to learn to think while being taught presupposes the other difficult art of paying attention. Nothing is more rare: listening seems to be the hardest thing in the world and misunderstanding the easiest, for we tend to hear

¹ Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America*, Little, Brown and Company, 1945, p. 35.

what we think we are going to hear, and too often we make it so. In a lifetime one is lucky to meet six or seven people who know how to attend: the rest, some of whom believe themselves well-bred and highly educated, have for the most part fidgety ears; their span of attention is as short as the mating of a fly. They seem afraid to lend their mind to another's thought, as if it would come back to them bruised and bent. This fear is of course fatal to sociability, and Lord Chesterfield was right when he wrote his son that the power of attention was the mark of a civilized man. The baby cannot attend, the savage and the boor will not. It is the boorishness of inattention that makes pleasant discussion turn into stupid repetitive argument, and that doubles the errors and mishaps of daily life.¹

Before books and printing, the primary element in acquiring knowledge was listening. A "lecture" originally meant a "reading" from some precious manuscript. The reader read slowly and stopped to explain difficult passages to his listeners. The process has changed; reading is no doubt the primary element in acquiring knowledge, but listening remains the second most important element.

Why is listening, doubtless competing with the proper use of time for first among good study methods, the most difficult of the learning processes? The practices of seeing (reading), writing, and thinking are exercised within the person. But listening takes on the complexity of the listener having to coordinate their mental powers with an outside force—the person or thing to which the listener is listening. This demands the discipline of subjecting the mind of the listener to that of the speaker.

The second problem in learning to listen arises from lack of associated control. When you learn to read, your eyes control the speed with which you read. When you write there is actual physical control in your hand. In thinking, the analysis of thought travels at exactly the speed capacity of your mind. But when you begin to train yourself to be a good listener, you are faced with a difficulty not unlike that of trying to drive a car without brakes. You can think four times as fast as the average teacher can speak.

Only by demanding of yourself the most unswerving concentration and discipline can you hold your mind on the track of the speaker. This can be accomplished if the listener uses the free time to think around the topic—"listening between the lines" as it is sometimes called. It consists of anticipating the teacher's next point, summarizing what has been said, questioning in silence the accuracy or importance of what is being taught, putting the teacher's thoughts into one's own words, and trying to discern the test or examination questions that will be formed from this material. If you can train yourself to do this you will: (1) save yourself much precious time by not having to read what has already been taught; and (2) you can give a more thoughtful and acceptable answer either in the give and take of class discussion or on a written test.

When you have learned to adjust your speed of thinking to the rate of a speaker, you have added two valuable elements to your character: (1) ability to discipline your mind to the present; and (2) you have made yourself a follower. Your mind performs in time, but it tries desperately to steer your thoughts into the pleas-

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