

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

---

July 2019

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 1003



## HOW TO TALK AND HOW TO LISTEN

A Guide to Pleasurable and Profitable Conversation

Mortimer Adler

July 21, 1980

*How To Read A Book* was published in 1940. It became a best seller at once and remained on the best-seller list for over a year. It has been selling steadily and substantially ever since 1940—a matter of the last forty years.

My aim—or should I say, ambition—is to make a book of the above title a best-seller and a long-seller to equal, if not exceed, *How To Read A Book*.

The subjects of the two books are obviously parallel, but they also involve important differences. Reading and writing are usually solitary performances. Teaching a person how to read or write well instructs him in an art he can practise by himself and in the privacy of his study or bedroom. But talking and listening are social functions: one talks to and listens to others.

Conversation is the word I have chosen for this social performance. I hate the in-word “communication” with all its overtones of computer and information theory. I plan to use the word “conversation” to over all the following phenomena:

heart-to-heart talks (between lovers, members of the family, friends, close associates)

mind-to-mind talks (between those engaged in any cooperative intellectual enterprise—creative work in the arts, scientific research, business negotiations, etc.)

discussions and conferences (of all sorts)

interrogations

disputes and debates

listening to lectures and questioning the speaker

even, perhaps, idle chit-chat and cocktail party (though this is on the very fringe of real talking and listening because it is usually mindless)

Another general point concerns the uses anyone makes of his free time (note: “free” time, not “leisure” time) to engage in the pursuits of leisure. The leisure pursuits which are solitary include cooking, carpentry, gardening (anything creative, up to high art), reading and writing, looking at pictures, listening to music, travel and observing, and above all thinking. The leisure pursuits which are social include all the acts of friendship, and above all, conversation in all the forms that I have indicated above. In fact, I would say that conversation lies at the heart of our use of free time for leisure pursuits that are social rather than solitary and private.

All this by way of introduction and general framework. Now down to the business of explaining how one uses one’s mind to talk well to others and to listen well to what they have to say. These rules are more difficult to formulate than the rules of writing and reading. But the main point to make at the beginning is that, just as one does not read with one’s eyes but with one’s mind, so one does not listen with one’s ears but with one’s mind. Minding is common to writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

Some of the rules of listening are the same as the rules of reading. But reading is easier because the readable matter endures physically: one can go back to it, read it a second time, mark the pages, turn back from one page to another, and so. The listenable matter is physically evanescent: it is in transit at every moment: one

cannot listen twice or a third time; one cannot turn the speaker back to an earlier sentence, and so on.

The rules of listening are, therefore, guides to the control of one's attention, so that one catches the meaning of swiftly flowing talk as it happens. And, of course, the rules vary according to whether the talk is a lecture (which is like a readable essay) or the give-and-take of rapid discussion, or the answers to questions asked, and so on. Ordinary conversation is one thing; controlled discussion is another; negotiations still another. And in each case, what one must do to listen well differs.

And just as in reading, one must learn how to read between the lines, so in listening one must learn how to listen to what is not said as well as to what is said.

On the side of talking, there are again basic simple rules that are very much like the rules of good writing. But again with a fundamental difference, because the writer always assumes that the written matter is there for the reader to re-read and examine backwards and forwards in a variety of ways. The speaker or talker must always be conscious of the fact that what is delivered orally is like a flowing stream: it must be presented so that the listener can follow the flow, always in the on-going direction.

When the conversation takes the form of serious discussion, the heart of the matter lies in the asking and answering of questions. Asking good questions is a most difficult thing to do: it requires a great deal of skill. And even more important is being able to ask a sequence of questions (as Socrates did), the second following up on the first, the third on the second, and so on. But this cannot be completely planned in advance because the second question, well asked, must depend on good listening to the answer to the first question, and so on.

It is seldom the case that strangers can converse well—easily, fluently, with full comprehension. The reason is that, being strangers, they come to conversation with different vocabularies and contexts. It takes time for two persons to learn how to talk to and listen to one another, and as they learn how to do these things well, the conversations they have become more and more pleasurable and profitable. The highest delights of conversation are enjoyed by lovers or close friends or by associates in common enterprises who share the same backgrounds, vocabularies, and contexts for their speaking and listening to one another.

The foregoing is not an outline of the book to be written. It merely indicates in some detail the great interest of the subject and

some of the main approaches to the treatment of it. It is too early in the game for me to write an outline or a table of contents. That will come later. They should suffice for the present to give substance to the title chosen for a book to be written in the summer of 1982 and published in the spring of 1983.



---

---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501) (c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.