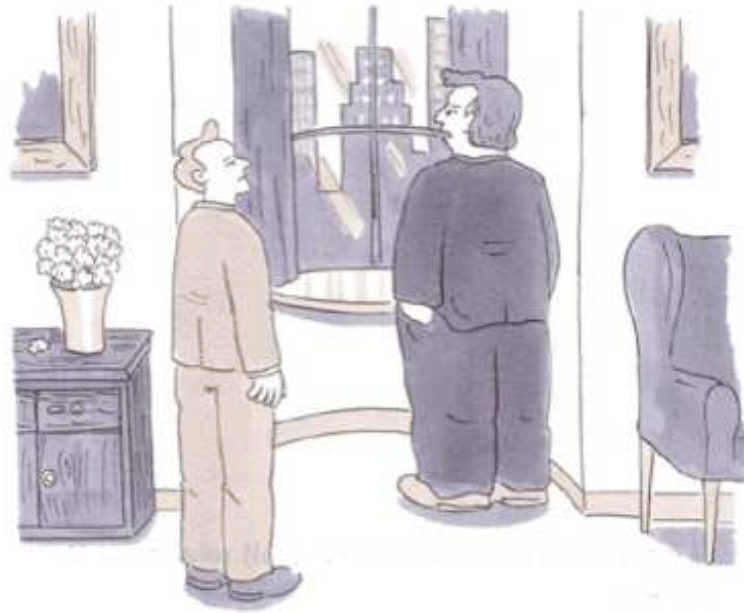


*If speaking is silver, then listening is gold.*  
—Turkish Proverb



"I'm not convinced that's the best strategy.  
Then again, I wasn't listening."

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## THE ART OF LISTENING

Mortimer J. Adler

Listening is like sailing. One has to adjust to the ever-shifting wind, to anticipate its veering this way or that, to run tight or loose on the lines as the wind's velocity changes, and to be always ready to come about when the direction of the wind demands it.

Good listeners are not in command of the flow of talk to which they have to be attentive. They must adjust to the pace of the speaker, be prepared for shifts from one topic to another, increase

their attention or relax it as the talk gains momentum or slackens, and be always on the lookout for what is implied rather than explicitly said.

All these things make listening much more difficult than reading. The book, or other reading material, is yours to do with as you please, at your own pace and in your own way. You can turn back the pages when you want to. You can underline words or sentences, put queries or other marks in the margin. You can read as slowly or quickly as you please; you can stop for as long as you wish and start again when the spirit moves you. You are in charge of the process, not the writer.

Like reading, listening is not a passive process. The good reader is a demanding reader—one whose mind is actively engaged in getting at what the writer has to say, doing so by asking questions of the author and trying to ferret out the answers.

So, too, the good listener is an inquiring one—a questioning one. But this is more difficult to do in listening than in reading. The listener cannot pause to think of the questions to be asked and then, after the pause, turn his attention back to the speaker. The listener must simultaneously put his mind to a double use—attending actively to what is being said and at the same time thinking about it.

The task of listening differs according to the character of the speech being heard. If it is sustained speech, as in a lecture or an address, the listener, politely silent throughout the delivery, can, of course, and should take notes. Failure to do so is likely to result in loss of attention. It is so easy to turn the speaker off and turn one's mind to other things, and then sometime later discover that one has missed hearing much that is relevant to what one is now taking in. Making running notes throughout the speech or lecture helps to prevent this.

The short spurts of speech that occur in good conversation or two-way talk do not require note-taking. In fact, it would be patently impolite to do so. But conversation does require something else of listeners. They must try to understand what is being said to them before they respond.

We are all acquainted with the kind of two-way talk that is a travesty of good conversation. Jones is speaking while Smith remains silent, appearing to listen but with his mind concentrated on what he is going to say when Jones stops speaking. When that happens, Smith voices what he has been thinking about, even though it has

not the slightest shred of relevance to what Jones has said. While this is going on, Jones in turn remains politely silent, doing the same thing—thinking of what he is going to say when he has the opportunity to do so. And so it goes on and on—two people talking at, not to, one another, and neither listening to what the other is saying.

To prevent that, there is a simple rule to follow, simple but difficult to apply if one is too impatient. After the other fellow has had his say, your obligation as a listener is to say; “Let me see if I understand what you have just said. As I get it, your point is such and such, or this and that. Am I right?” You should then wait until the speaker either responds by saying “Yes, that is precisely what I meant,” or says “No, that was not what I meant. It was as follows,” Only if you are now sure that you have understood what you have heard, should you proceed to respond to it, either agreeing or disagreeing, or making some comment that elaborates on the point, or asking some question that calls on him for further elaboration.

This rule need be followed only if the conversation is about matters of sufficient importance to deserve such care. It would be totally out of place to proceed in this way in the course of cocktail hour chatter or dinner table chitchat. On such occasions, only civility and politeness is required. But when the conversation is about ideas or other matters of importance, where understanding is prerequisite to agreement or disagreement, and where getting at the truth is at stake, then it becomes imperative to apply the rule.

People who do not do so tend to be either inane or impertinent. They either agree to something that they do not understand and then they are inane, or disagree and then they are impertinent. In order to be sure that a common understanding has been reached first and that there is a sufficient meeting of minds to make either agreement or disagreement significant, the listener and speaker must go through the process described, in which they check their understanding of one another by taking the steps indicated.

Sometimes serious discussion (at a business conference, a sales meeting, a meeting of the board of directors, or at a seminar concerned with basic ideas and issues) proceeds by the asking and answering of questions. Here there is another simple rule to follow: Be sure you understand the question before you answer it.

What usually happens is the very opposite. A great many persons, and intelligent ones at that, regard a question as nothing more than a stimulus to start speaking, uttering in words what they have been

silently saying to themselves. They are like Pavlov's dog, starting to salivate when the bell rings. What they have been thinking about silently may have nothing whatsoever to do with the question being asked, but when the question is addressed to them they respond by saying whatever is on their mind. That, of course, is likely to be no answer to the question at all. If the questioner allows that to happen, he, too, is responsible for ruining the discussion instead of making it profitable for all concerned.

In conducting Executive Seminars at the Aspen Institute in Colorado, I tell the participants in the opening session that I am going to be asking them questions about the texts they have read and that I want answers to my questions, not just statements from them about whatever is on their minds. It takes two or three days before they comply with this request. At first, they respond like Pavlov's dog, and I jerk them up by saying: "Obviously, you did not hear my question. Let me repeat it." I do so, and once again they are likely to respond by another irrelevant statement. I then repeat the question again, and continue to do so until it becomes embarrassing.


After a few days, they realize that I am not going to take any old statement in response to the questions I ask. They begin to pay close attention to the question. They do more than that. They have learned that it is prudent for them to turn to me and say either "Will you repeat that question once again" or "Will you rephrase the question for me to make it a little clearer," or "Let me see if I understand what you are asking: is it this or that?" When they get to this stage, they have, indeed, become good listeners and then the discussion in which we are engaged becomes a genuine interchange in which minds are meeting.

What is necessary as a prerequisite for anyone to become a good listener? In this, as in almost everything else, the answer is motivation. When some forty years ago, I wrote *How to Read A Book*, I pointed out in the opening chapter that while few human beings are good readers, actively using their minds on most occasions, almost everyone is a good reader on those occasions when he or she is sufficiently motivated to make the requisite effort. The example I gave of such motivation for intensely perceptive reading was the reading of a letter from one's beloved. Readers of love letters read every word twice, read between the lines, turn the letter upside down and read it that way, ask themselves all sorts of questions about what is meant, pay attention to what is not said as well as to what is said, and so on.

Recently, in *How to Speak/How to Listen*, I suggested a parallel example of equally intense motivation for good Listening. You are a passenger on a transoceanic flight. The pilot comes on the intercom and says: “This is your captain speaking. We are compelled to make an emergency water landing. It will occur twelve minutes from now. Listen carefully to the following instructions. If you follow them, there need be no injuries or loss of life. When I have finished, the cabin attendants will pass down the aisles to answer your questions. Listen carefully to their answers.”

Would you listen carefully with rapt attention then? Would you try to ask clear, succinct questions? Would you listen to the answers. Yes, of course, you would, because your very life depended on it. Well, that is the way you should always try to listen when the matter under consideration is of sufficient importance to justify the effort.

If you form the habit of active, perceptive listening—a habit that consists in a settled disposition to proceed according to the few simple rules recommended—it will become easier and easier for you to listen well on every occasion that requires it.

It will not only become easier, but you will also find that it becomes more pleasurable and more profitable to engage in conversation about serious matters. 

*From Gentlemen's Quarterly, September 1983*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

I hope you have been well. I have a couple matters.

First, I want to thank you and the Center for publishing the Introduction to Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*. I purchased the book and have not stopped reading, thinking, and talking about it for two weeks. It has been great food for thought, confirming many convictions I have, challenging many beliefs I hold, and introducing me to many new ideas and points of view about culture and our current state of affairs. Thank you for this wonder-filled gift.

Secondly, as you know, I sit on the faculty of Harrison Middleton University, formerly the College of the Humanities and Sciences.

Harrison Middleton is a great books, great ideas distance-learning college modeled on St. Johns. Would it be possible to include the University on the Center's web page under the listing of Great Books Colleges? Please let me know what information you need for the listing.

Thanks again for all you do to promote thoughtfulness.

All the best,

Gary Schoepfel  
The Great Books Foundation

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Alex Beam**

**Michael Miller**

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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