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## WRITING WHILE AND AFTER LISTENING

**Mortimer Adler**

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Of all the books I have written, *How to Read a Book* has been most often reprinted since its publication in 1940, has reached the widest audience, and has elicited what has been for me the most gratifying expressions of appreciation from readers whose lives it has affected. It has made reading for them both more profitable and more pleasurable, and, opening the pages of the great books for them, it has given them a lifelong pursuit.

Of all the articles I have written, none has been reprinted more frequently in anthologies or textbooks for students than an essay I wrote in 1941 for *The Saturday Review*, entitled "How to Mark a Book." *How to Read a Book* had insisted upon the necessity of actively using one's mind while reading, always by reading with a questioning mind. That can be done without pen, pencil, or pad. But the best way to make sure that you are incessantly active while reading is by making notes, page by page, as you read—not in bed or in an armchair, but at a table or desk.

Making notes while reading is highly useful, certainly to be recommended to anyone who may lapse back into passive reading, but it is not absolutely necessary. It may not be necessary to make notes while listening if the speech to which you are listening is sufficiently brief. However, if it promises to be fairly long and complex, you would be well advised to bring pencil and paper to the task of listening to it. Unless you can trust your memory more than most of us can, I would recommend making notes, but only if the speech has enough substance and significance for you to make the effort.

Writing while listening is productive and desirable. Talking while listening is counterproductive.

The notes you take while listening record what you have done with your mind to take in what you have heard. That record enables you to go on to the second step, which I regard as equally important to the activity of listening. What you have noted during the course of listening, together with what your memory retains of what was said, provides you with food for thought.

The thinking you then do should lead you to make a second set of notes, much more orderly, much more comprehensive, and much more critical. These concluding notes constitute the completion of the task of active listening. You have used your mind as well as possible in response to what, in the speech you heard, you thought was worthy of attention and comment.

The chief difference between the two sets of notes is that the first must be made at a pace dictated by the speaker while the second can be timed at your own discretion. In addition, the order of what you jot down while listening is determined by the order of what is being said, while you are entirely free to order your second set of notes in whatever way seems best to serve the purpose of getting at the gist of what you heard and expressing your own reaction to it.

There are those who, trying to save themselves time, try to do, while listening, what they should reserve for subsequent reflection. They attempt to jot down their own reactions to what is being said at the same time that they are trying to record what they think the speaker is saying. This not only reduces the accuracy of the record, it also prevents them from hearing much of what has been said. So preoccupied are they with their own thoughts that they pay too little attention to the thoughts expressed by the speaker.

Even if you do not go on to complete the task of listening by making the second set of notes after due reflection at a later time, do not make the mistake of trying to combine your record of what you are hearing with your own reactions to it. Listeners who are more concerned to express themselves than to pay close attention to what someone else is trying to express are very poor listeners—they really wish they were making the speech rather than listening to it.

In earlier chapters I have divided uninterrupted speeches, long or short, into those that aim to affect the conduct of their listeners by persuading them to do something or to feel differently, and those that aim to affect the minds of their listeners by adding to their knowledge, altering their understanding, or getting them to think differently.

I have used the term “sales talk” or persuasive speech for the one, and “lecture” or instructive speech for the other, but the reader should remember that I have tried to use both terms in the broadest possible manner, covering political oratory and business negotiations as well as all forms of marketing under the one, and including under the other all forms of teaching.

Since the way in which we should react to speech that aims at persuading us to act or feel in a certain manner differs markedly from the way in which we should react to speech that aims to change our minds and affect our thinking, it is necessary to deal separately with notemaking while listening to persuasive speech and notemaking while listening to instructive speech. I will begin with the latter.

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The running notes you make while listening to instructive speech should include at least four different observations on your part.

1. If the speech you are listening to is itself well organized and prepared in a manner that facilitates listening, the speaker will in his opening remarks tell you the ground he proposes to cover. He will indicate in summary fashion the gist of the message he is trying to convey. He may even, if he is a very orderly speaker, tell you at the very beginning how he is going to cover the ground he has laid out for himself and how he is going to proceed, point by point, to develop his central theme, leading up to the conclusion or conclusions he wishes you to share with him.

If that is the case, note-making must begin at the very beginning. Many listeners wait too long before they begin to jot down notes. They are laggardly or dilatory about using their minds for active listening. They are slow in adjusting themselves to the speaker and, as a result, often miss noting what is of prime importance to record.

Not all speakers, of course, are as orderly as they should be, nor do all make the effort to prepare their listeners for the task of listening well by telling them at the very beginning what they should pay particular attention to. Their failures in this respect will be manifested by the rambling and desultory character of their opening remarks.

This should put you on notice that your task of notemaking is going to be more difficult. You are going to have to be alert in waiting for the time when the speaker finally gets around to revealing what is on his mind as the main substance of address. You cannot prevent the speaker from wandering, but do not let your own mind wander. Keep your ears cocked for statements by the speaker that, at one moment or another, focus your attention on the central substance of the speech. Take note of them.

2. Once again, if the speaker you are listening to is genuinely concerned to have you understand what is being said he will realize that his conceptual vocabulary—the basic terms of reference he will be using—may be peculiarly his own, and he will make a special effort to call attention to these terms.

When each term is first introduced, the speaker will say, “I am using this word or that in the following manner” or “Please note that when I use the word ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ I am referring to ‘\_\_\_\_\_.’” By all means, do note what you have been asked to observe. Not to pay attention to the speaker’s special use of certain words or phrases is to fail to come to terms with him. That failure on your part is a serious if not fatal obstacle to your understanding what is being said.

Less careful or considerate speakers may use their own private vocabulary without making any effort to call your attention to the crucial terms to which they have attached a special meaning. Then your task as a listener is more difficult, but also more important to discharge. You must make the effort to spot the words or phrases that the speaker is using in a sense that seems strange or unfamiliar to you, or at least that differs from the sense in which you yourself use the same words or phrases. Take note of as many of these as you can.

3. In the course of arguing for the conclusion or conclusions that the speaker wishes you to adopt, a logically sensitive speaker, of which unfortunately there are too few, will lay before you the underlying premises on which his reasoning rests.

Some of these, if not all, will consist of statements that the speaker cannot establish as true beyond a reasonable doubt or with a high degree of probability, certainly not beyond the shadow of a doubt. The time available does not permit the full elucidation of all or most of his underlying premises.

The logically sensitive speaker will ask you to follow his reasoning by accepting his assumptions for the time being—accepting them to discern their consequences, to see how they lead to the conclusions he wishes to arrive at. It is important for you to take note of these assumptions, whether or not the speaker is honest enough to admit that, for the purposes of the occasion, that is all they are, not axioms or self-evident truths, or even adequately supported principles.

Many speakers fail to make their initial premises clear. They fail to call attention to the relatively small number of assertions on which their whole argument rests. They may indicate them obliquely or acknowledge them tacitly.

Your task is to be on the alert to detect the initial premises, the principles, the assumptions that provide the ultimate grounds for what is being said. The task is more difficult to perform if these are concealed rather than revealed, but it is then all the more necessary to discharge.

4. If the speech you are listening to moves in one or another fashion from starting points to conclusions, that motion will consist in some marshaling of reasons, some adduction of evidence, some formulation of arguments, more or less explicitly presented. The more explicitly they are presented, the easier your task of noting the reasons, the evidence, the arguments. But easy or difficult, you must make the effort to jot down in some shorthand fashion a record of how the speaker tried to carry you from his starting points to his conclusions.

Whether or not the speaker has given you advance notice of the conclusions he wishes to leave you with, and whether or not he has been as explicit as he should be in presenting the grounds for reaching these conclusions, you cannot complete your note-making

while listening to a speech without making some record of what the conclusions are.

If you have done all of the four foregoing things while the speech is going on, your running notes, more or less orderly and more or less abbreviated, will be a sufficient record of what you have heard to enable you to take the next step, in which you review what you have heard, reflect upon it, and express your own reactions to it.

That need not be done at once. There is seldom the time or the circumstances for doing it then. But if you are going to do it at all, it should not be postponed too long. It can be done better when your memory of what you have heard is fresh, rich, and vivid rather than stale, fragmentary, and dim.

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In making the second set of notes, the following things should be done.

1. First of all, regardless of how orderly or disorderly the speaker has been, you should try to put down on paper as orderly a summary of the speech as you can manage. You can extract the material for his summary from your running notes, embellished by what your memory has retained. Whereas your running notes may have had the brevity of shorthand, your retrospective summary should be spelled out in as much detail as you can achieve.

Ideally, this retrospective summary should amount to a précis of the speaker's own notes, if he had an orderly set of notes before him as the guidelines of his speech. It may even be, in short form, a written record of what was said. It should at least be an accurate and unbiased representation of what was said, even though it may not be a comprehensive account of it.

2. With this summary laid before you (including the speaker's initial premises or assumptions, the words he used in some special sense that were his crucial terms, the conclusions at which he aimed, and the ways in which he tried to support those conclusions) you are in a position to react to what you have heard. Expressing your own reactions is as much a part of actively listening to a speech as it is a part of actively reading a book.

If you understood the speech perfectly and if you agree with its conclusions completely, your only reaction will be to say "Amen."

That may happen in a rare case, but it seldom happens in the normal course of events.

a. When this does not happen, your first task is to express in words the things you failed to understand. Why did the speaker say this or that? Why did he think that the reasons or evidence he advanced were adequate to support his conclusions. Why did he fail to comment on objections that might be raised to what he said? What did he mean by this or that word which he used in a special sense without explicitly calling attention to the sense in which he used it?

b. Next, with regard to points or matters concerning which you think you have sufficient understanding of what was said either to agree, or disagree with the speaker, you should make some statement of what you agreed with and what you disagreed with. If you wish to be particularly scrupulous about your disagreements, you should indicate your reasons for taking that position. Even with respect to your agreement, it may serve some purpose to note whether it rests on the reasons given by the speaker or is grounded also on additional reasons of your own.

c. Agreement or disagreement may not always follow an understanding of what you have heard. You may find that the speaker's support for his conclusions is inadequate in some respect and you may not be able yourself to provide the support needed either to affirm or to deny the conclusions in question. Under these circumstances, you should record yourself as suspending judgment. That leaves more work to be done, by yourself or someone else, before you can make up your mind about the matters in question.

d. Whether you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment, there is one more thing to do in response to the speech you have listened to. Supposing the speaker is correct in his conclusions and supposing that they can be adequately supported, it still remains to ask "What of it?" That question can also be asked on the opposite supposition; namely, that the speaker's conclusions are incorrect and that sufficient support can be found for a contrary set of conclusions. This final question, asked in either case, involves you in thinking about the significance for you of the speech as a whole.

If these recommendations for note-making while listening to a speech and note-making when you have time later to reflect upon what you have heard seem excessively elaborate and painstaking, they should be followed only to the extent that the character and

substance of the speech is rich and important enough to deserve all the effort called for.

There are, of course, many uninterrupted speeches that are so trivial in content, so disorderly in presentation, and so incoherent in general that they do not deserve careful listening, much less the kind of active listening that involves making notes.

The precept of prudence in following the recommendations suggested is simply to make whatever adaptation or use of them the substance, style, and importance of the speech deserves, making the maximum effort for the best of speeches, less for those that are less worthy, and none at all for those that were not worth listening to in the first place.

If the speech, however important and excellent, is relatively brief, then close and active listening to it calls for fewer and briefer notes than those indicated above. It may even be that what the memory can retain of a relatively short speech suffices for making retrospective and reflective notes about it after it is over, without having to make running notes while it is going on.

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When you are listening to a sales talk, to political oratory of any kind, to commercial appeals, or to exhortations by business executives, all of whom speak with the purpose of getting you to do something or to feel one way rather than another, it is important for you to have a reasonable degree of sales resistance. Don't be a pushover for persuasion, but at the same time do not erect insuperable barriers to being moved by it.

Active listening to uninterrupted speech of this general kind is usually less exacting than listening actively to speech that is essentially instructive rather than persuasive. Nevertheless, it may be useful to make a few brief notes while listening. These should usually take the form of questions to which answers should be forthcoming.

1. What is the speaker trying to sell, or, in other words, what is he trying to get me to do or get me to feel?

2. Why does the speaker think I should be persuaded by this appeal? What reasons are offered or what facts are presented in support of this appeal?



3. What points that I think are relevant has the speaker failed to mention? What has he failed to say that might sway me one way or the other?

4. When the speaker has completed his persuasive effort, what questions of significance to me has he failed to answer, or even consider?

If, on one or more of the foregoing counts, the speaker has failed to satisfy you, so that you are left unable to answer these questions or are left in serious doubt about what the answers are, you should remain unpersuaded. This does not mean that you are unpersuadable about the matter at hand, but only that more must be done to overcome your justified sales resistance and to turn you into a buyer, a complier, or an accomplice of some kind.

In my judgment, it is seldom the case that an attempt to persuade can be carried to a successful conclusion by uninterrupted speech. Such speech must usually be supplemented by what I have called two-way talk—an interchange between speaker and listener, in which one asks questions and the other answers them.

The notes made while listening serve to facilitate this question and answer session, which should begin when the speech is over.

The person engaged in persuasion should be as anxious and ready to engage in two-way talk as the audience being addressed. He can reinforce and drive home crucial points by answering the questions put to him by his listeners. He can assuage doubts and overcome objections by doing this skillfully—and honestly!

In addition, he can make his original appeal more effectively persuasive by asking his listeners questions that may bring to the fore points of resistance they have kept in the background, or by posing, and then at once answering, questions that lurked in the back of his listeners' minds.

In this way, he can deal with and try to overcome half-formulated or even hidden objections.

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What is true of uninterrupted speech that aims at persuasion is equally true of uninterrupted speech that aims at instruction. From the point of view of listeners to the latter kind of speech, the two-way talk of a question and answer session provides an opportunity

for getting answers to questions that they have raised in their notes or for posing objections to what the speaker has said to which they would like to hear the speaker's response. As a result, they may cease to suspend judgment, or change their minds from disagreement to agreement, or perhaps the reverse. In any case, the question and answer session will serve to fulfill the efforts they made to listen as actively as possible.

Speakers who seek to instruct also profit from engaging in the two-way talk of a forum or question and answer session after the speech is finished. Without it, they can seldom if ever be sure that what they have tried to say has been well listened to, nor can they make a reasonable estimate of how far they succeeded in affecting the minds of their audience in the way they wished. Only by submitting to the questions the audience poses or the objections it raises can speakers correct misunderstandings that have occurred, repeat what should have been heard but may not have been heard at all, and supplement what they have said by introducing points that they should have made but failed to make in the first place.

In addition, speakers themselves may wish to use the occasion of a forum or a question and answer session to ask the audience questions, specifically for the purpose of finding out whether they have been understood, what difficulties they have failed to consider, what objections may lie hidden in the listeners' minds.

Uninterrupted speech and silent listening, even when they are done as well as possible, seldom serve the ultimate purpose of communication, which is the meeting of minds in such a way that they share a common understanding, whether or not they agree or disagree. Such speech and listening should always, or wherever possible, be followed by two-way talk, the kind of interchange between speakers and listeners that is conversation or discussion.

Only through conversation or discussion can speaking and listening be consummated and rendered as fruitful as they should be. This is the kind of speaking and listening to which we now turn in the next part of this book. There we shall first of all treat the forum or question and answer session that should follow uninterrupted speech and silent listening. 

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

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**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 and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

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