

Active Listening

Textbooks on debating generally overlook listening skills. Our instinct is to consider listening as a passive activity and to want to focus on speaking. If that's the view you bring to this chapter, wise up! You will spend most of your debating career listening. In a six-speaker debate, for example, you will be listening for more than 80% of the time. This chapter will give some guidance on how to listen actively and what to listen for.

Hearing and Listening

We don't listen to most of what we hear. Feel free to read the last sentence again, but listening and hearing are very different capacities, and we conflate them only as a convenience. Listening is the process of attaching meaning to sound. We *hear* the sound of traffic as we walk along the street. We *hear* the hubbub of conversation at a party. We *listen* to a panicky horn near us or when someone at the party shouts out our name.

We instinctively listen to enough of a conversation—or a speech—to confirm that the speaker is saying what we expected and then get on with formulating our response. That's fine when discussing whether to go for pizza or a burger, but in debate—or lectures or negotiations for that matter—it's a serious limitation. Our brains predict what is going to be said next and decide what was said previously—regardless of what actually happened. For what it's worth, our eyes do the same thing with text. You will have read several sentences in this book that aren't there and not read several that are.

Active listening is the skill of listening to what has actually been said rather than hearing what you expected to be said. You hear with your ears, you listen with your brain. Active listening allows you to become a true participant in what is going on around you rather than a casual observer swept along in the moment.