

Often listening to what hasn't been said requires the debater to take a step back and see the debate in its wider context. If the debate has begun to focus on how an institution should be reformed or how a military campaign should be conducted, it's frequently worth checking that, at some point, the case has been made for having the institution or conducting the campaign at all. Or has the speaker just skipped that bit of the argument and everyone has gone along with him because it seems like the polite thing to do? What, in any argument, is the speaker asking his audience to take for granted by the simple expedient of not mentioning it?

The approach of considering what has not been said can apply more generally to the arguments on both sides of the debate. Inevitably any speaker will put forward those arguments that she feels work best for her side. An active listener asks if this is the whole story. For example, if a case has been demonstrated for a particular curriculum reform on the basis that it will bring wider social benefits and ultimately stimulate the economy, there is nothing to stop you from asking about its immediate pedagogical impact in the classroom or whether teachers qualified to teach it are available—and interested. You may well end up debating within the paradigm set up by other speakers, but it's worth at least being aware of what you're doing and considering alternatives.

Learning to think about what is not being said takes practice and vigilance. It's all too easy to accept that certain topics should be discussed in certain ways. There's nothing necessarily wrong with that; there will always be some issues that are more germane to any given topic than others. However, taking a few seconds to think whether a speaker is presenting the whole story will save you a lot of time in blind alleys.

Deafened by Style and Situation

There is a popular myth in debating. It is the notion that it's possible to ignore a speaker's style. It really isn't, and pretending otherwise can be quite dangerous. Instead, you should be aware that you are swayed by style and be alert to that fact, while, in your turn, you are using style as freely as possible to distract your opponents.

Giving the benefit of the doubt to speakers who are confident, charming, or witty is simply part of how we communicate. We're less likely to notice logical mistakes if we're enjoying the way someone is speaking. And we're vastly less likely to interrupt them because we instinctively want to hear what they have to say. Conversely, if a speaker has a monotonous voice or is difficult to hear because she speaks quietly or to understand because of a strong accent, we are more likely to "tune out" and think about something else. If you