It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to listen. —Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), writer and philosopher of nature—and perhaps most popularly known for his advice to "Simplify, simplify, simplify"—gives listening a major role in communication—it’s half of the communication exchange. The ability to listen effectively and critically is crucial to successful public speaking and it is to this topic that we turn in this chapter. Together with listening, we cover criticism—the art of evaluating the public speaking event. In this chapter you’ll learn

◆ how listening works and how you can become a more effective and efficient listener
◆ how criticism works and how you can become a more effective and more constructive critic, especially of the speeches you’ll hear in this course
LISTENING TO SPEECHES

Listening is often thought to be the same as hearing; it’s just something that takes place when you’re in hearing range of speech. Actually, listening and hearing are not the same; listening is a lot more complex than hearing.

Before reading about the principles of effective listening, examine your own listening habits by taking the accompanying listening self-test, “How Good a Listener Are You?”

TEST YOURSELF

How Good a Listener Are You?
Respond to each question using the following scale: 1 = always, 2 = frequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = seldom, and 5 = never.

1. I consider listening and hearing to be essentially the same, so I listen by simply keeping my ears open.
2. I allow my mind to wander away from what the speaker is talking about.
3. I simplify messages I hear by omitting details.
4. I focus on a particular detail of what the speaker is saying instead of the general meaning the speaker wishes to communicate.
5. I allow my attitudes toward the topic or speaker to influence my evaluation of the message.
6. I assume that what I expect to hear is what is actually said.
7. I stop listening when the speaker attacks my personal beliefs.
8. I listen to what others say but I don’t feel what they are feeling.
9. I judge and evaluate what the speaker is saying before I fully understand the meaning intended.
10. I rehearse my questions and responses while the speaker is speaking.

How did you do? Add up the scores for all 10 statements. Your score should be somewhere between 10 and 50. Since all statements describe ineffective listening tendencies, high scores reflect effective listening and low scores reflect ineffective listening. If you scored significantly higher than 30, then you probably have better-than-average listening skills. Scores significantly below 30 represent lower-than-average listening skills. Regardless of your score, however, most people can significantly improve their listening skills.

What will you do? Consider how you might use these statements to improve your listening effectiveness. A good way to begin doing this is to review these statements and try to identify situations in which each statement would be appropriate and situations in which each statement would be inappropriate. In addition, consider reading a book on listening effectiveness cited in this chapter or log on to one of the online bookstores (www.bn.com, www.borders.com, or www.amazon.com) to look up recent books about listening.
What Is Listening?

Listening can be described as a series of five steps: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. The process is represented in Figure 2.1.

**Receiving** Unlike listening, hearing begins and ends with the first stage: receiving. Hearing is something that just happens when you get within earshot of some auditory stimuli. Listening is quite different; it begins (but does not end) with receiving a speaker’s messages. The messages a listener receives are both verbal and nonverbal; they consist of words as well as gestures, facial expressions, variations in volume and rate, and lots more, as we will see throughout this book.

At this stage you recognize not only what is said (verbally) but also what is not said (nonverbally). You receive both the politician’s summary of accomplishments in education as well as the omission of the failed promises to improve health care programs.

Receiving messages is a highly selective process. You don’t listen to all the available auditory stimuli. Rather, you selectively tune in to certain messages and tune out others. Generally, you listen most carefully to messages that you feel will prove of value to you or that you feel are particularly interesting. At the same time you give less attention to messages that have less value or interest. Thus, you may listen carefully when your instructor tells you what will appear on the examination but will listen less carefully to an extended story or to routine announcements. To improve your receiving skills:

- Look at the speaker; make your mind follow your body and focus attention on the person speaking.
- Focus your attention on the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal messages, on what is said and on what isn’t said.
- Avoid attending to distractions in the environment.
- Focus your attention on what the speaker is saying rather than on any questions or objections you may have to what the speaker is saying.

**Understanding** Your understanding of what the speaker means includes both the thoughts that are expressed as well as the emotional tone that accompanies these thoughts, for example, the urgency or the joy or sorrow expressed in the message. To enhance understanding:

- Relate the new information the speaker is giving to what you already know.
- See the speaker’s messages from the speaker’s point of view; avoid judging the message until you fully understand it as the speaker intended it.
- Rephrase (paraphrase) the speaker’s ideas into your own words as you continue to listen.
**Remembering** Messages that you receive and understand need to be retained at least for some period of time. In public speaking situations you can augment your memory by taking notes or by taping the messages:

What you remember is actually not what was said, but what you think (or remember) was said. Memory for speech isn’t reproductive; you don’t simply reproduce in your memory what the speaker said. Rather, memory is reconstructive; you actually reconstruct the messages you hear into a system that seems to make sense to you. This is well illustrated in the exercise “Do You Really Remember What You Hear?” at the end of this chapter. In remembering:

- Identify the thesis or central idea and the major propositions.
- Summarize the message in a more easily retained form, being careful not to ignore crucial details or important qualifications.
- Repeat names and key concepts to yourself.
- Identify the organizational pattern and use it (visualize it) to organize what the speaker is saying.

**Evaluating** Evaluating consists of judging the message and the speaker’s credibility, truthfulness, or usefulness in some way. At this stage your own biases and prejudices become especially influential. These will influence what you single out for evaluation and what you’ll just let pass. They will influence what you judge good and what you judge bad. In some situations, the evaluation is more in the nature of critical analysis, a topic explored in detail later in this chapter. When evaluating:

- Resist evaluation until you feel you understand (at least reasonably well) the speaker’s point of view.
- Distinguish facts from inferences (see Chapter 7), opinions, and personal interpretations that you’re making as well as those made by the speaker.
- Identify any biases, self-interests, or prejudices that may lead the speaker to slant unfairly what he or she is presenting.
- Identify any biases that may lead you to remember what supports your attitudes and beliefs and to forget what contradicts them.

**Responding** Responding occurs in two phases: (1) nonverbal (and occasionally verbal) responses you make while the speaker is talking and (2) responses you make after the speaker has stopped talking. Responses made while the speaker is talking should support the speaker and show that you’re listening. These include what nonverbal researchers call backchanneling cues, gestures that let the speaker know that you’re listening, such as nodding your head, smiling, and leaning forward (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1995).

Responses made after the speaker has stopped talking are generally more elaborate and might include questions of clarification (“I wasn’t sure what you meant by reclassification”); expressions of agreement (“You’re absolutely right on this and I’ll support your proposal when it comes up for a vote”); and expressions of disagreement (“I disagree that Japanese products are superior to those produced in the United States”). For guidance on “how to listen with questions” see www.ablongman.com/devito. When responding:
Use a variety of backchanneling cues to support the speaker; using only one cue—for example, nodding constantly—will make it appear that you’re not listening but are on automatic pilot.

Support the speaker in your final responses by saying something positive.

Own your own responses; state your thoughts and feelings as your own; use I-messages (for example, say “I think the new proposal will entail greater expense than you outlined” rather than “Everyone will object to the plan because it will cost too much”).

Culture and Listening

Listening is difficult, in part, because of the inevitable differences in the communication systems between speaker and listener. Because each person has had a unique set of experiences, each person’s communication and meaning system is going to be different from the next person’s system. When speaker and listener come from different cultures, the differences and their effects are naturally much greater. Here are just a few areas where misunderstandings can occur.

Language and Speech Even when speaker and listener speak the same language, they speak it with different meanings and different accents. No two speakers speak exactly the same language. Every speaker speaks an idiolect—a unique
variation of the language. Speakers of the same language will sometimes have different meanings for the same terms because they have had different experiences.

 Speakers and listeners who have different native languages and who may have learned English as a second language will have even greater differences in meaning. Translations are never precise and never fully capture the meaning in the other language. If your meaning for house was learned in a culture in which everyone lived in their own house with lots of land around it, then communicating your meaning for house with someone whose meaning was learned in a neighborhood of high-rise tenements is going to be difficult. Although you’ll each hear the same word, the meanings you’ll each develop will be drastically different. In adjusting your listening—especially when in an intercultural setting—understand that the speaker’s meanings may be very different from yours even though you each know and speak the same language.

 Another part of speech is that of accents. In many classrooms throughout the country, there will be a wide range of accents (both regional and foreign). Those whose native language is a tonal one such as Chinese (where differences in pitch signal important meaning differences) may speak English with variations in pitch that may seem unnatural to others. Those whose native language is Japanese may have trouble distinguishing “l” from “r” since Japanese does not make this distinction. Regional accent differences may make it difficult for people from Mississippi and Maine, for example, to understand each other; words may have different meanings and pronunciations and this may make communication more difficult than if the speakers were from the same area.

 Nonverbal Differences Speakers from different cultures have different display rules, cultural rules that govern which nonverbal behaviors are appropriate and which are inappropriate in a public setting. As you listen to another person, you also “listen” to their nonverbals. If these are drastically different from what you expect on the basis of the verbal message, they may be seen as a kind of noise or interference or they may be seen as contradictory messages.

 Also, different cultures may give very different meanings to the same nonverbal gesture. For example, Americans consider direct eye contact an expression of honesty and forthrightness, but the Japanese often view this as a lack of respect. The Japanese will glance at the other person’s face rarely and then only for very short periods (Axtell, 1990a). Among some Latin Americans and Native Americans, direct eye contact between, say, a teacher and a student is considered inappropriate, perhaps aggressive; appropriate student behavior is to avoid eye contact with the teacher.

 Ethnocentrism Ethnocentrism is the tendency to evaluate the values, beliefs, and behaviors of your own culture as being more positive, logical, and natural than those of others. The nonethnocentric, on the other hand, would see both himself or herself and others as different but equal, with neither being inferior nor superior. Ethnocentric listening occurs when you listen to members of other cultures and consider them to be lacking in knowledge or expertise because they are from another culture or acknowledge members of your own culture as knowledgeable and expert simply because they are from your own culture. Similarly, you’re listening ethnocentrically when you listen to ideas about other cultures and view these as inferior simply because they differ from those of your own culture and view ideas of your own culture as superior simply because they are from your own culture.

Developing Strategies

Cathy is planning to give a speech in favor of gay marriage. Cathy herself is heterosexual and she wonders if her affectional orientation should be identified in the speech. On the one hand, she thinks it may help her cause; she thinks that if the audience sees her as a lesbian, they won’t listen with an open mind to what she has to say. On the other hand, Cathy believes that logically her affectional orientation is irrelevant to the argument’s validity. Also, by mentioning this, she fears offending the gay men and lesbians in the audience who may feel she’s afraid of being identified as a lesbian. What advice would you give Cathy?
Ethnocentrism exists on a continuum. People are not either ethnocentric or not ethnocentric; most are somewhere between these polar opposites. And, of course, your degree of ethnocentrism varies depending on the group on which you focus. For example, if you’re Greek American, you may have a low degree of ethnocentrism when dealing with Italian Americans (because of the similarities in the cultures of Greeks and Italians) but a high degree when dealing with Japanese Americans (because of the greater differences between the Greek and the Japanese cultures). Most important for our purposes is that your degree of ethnocentrism (and we’re all ethnocentric to some degree) will influence your listening effectiveness.

Recognizing the tendency toward ethnocentrism is the first step in combating any excesses. In addition, try following the suggestions for effective listening offered in this chapter, especially when you’re in an intercultural public speaking situation. Also, expose yourself to culturally different experiences. At the same time, resist the temptation to evaluate these through your own cultural filters. For many this will not be an easy experience; however, in light of the tremendous advantages to be gained through increased intercultural experiences, the effort seems well worth it.

Gender and Listening

According to Deborah Tannen (1990) in her best-selling You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation women seek to build rapport and establish a closer relationship and so use listening to achieve these ends. Men, on the other hand, will play up their expertise, emphasize it, and use it to dominate the interaction. Women play down their expertise and are more interested in communicating supportiveness. Tannen argues that the goal of a man in conversation is to be accorded respect and so he seeks to show his knowledge and expertise. A woman, on the other hand, seeks to be liked and so she expresses agreement.

Men and women also show that they’re listening in different ways. Women are more apt to give lots of listening cues such as interjecting yeah, uh-uh, nodding in agreement, and smiling. A man is more likely to listen quietly, without giving a lot of listening cues as feedback. Tannen argues, however, that men do listen less to women than women listen to men. The reason, says Tannen, is that listening places the person in an inferior position whereas speaking places the person in a superior one.

As a result of these differences, men may seem to assume a more argumentative posture while listening, as if getting ready to argue. They may also appear to ask questions that are more argumentative or that are designed to puncture holes in your position as a way to play up their own expertise. Women are more likely to ask supportive questions and perhaps offer criticism that is more positive than men. Women also use more cues in listening in a public speaking context. They let the speaker see that they’re listening. Men, on the other hand, use less listening cues in conversation and probably also in public speaking.

Men and women act this way to both men and women; their customary ways of communicating don’t seem to change depending on whether the listener is male or female. There’s no evidence to show that these differences represent any
negative motives on the part of men to prove themselves superior or of women to ingratiate themselves. Rather, these differences in listening are largely the result of the way in which men and women have been socialized.

**Guidelines for Listening More Effectively**

Effective listening is extremely important because you spend so much time listening. In fact, if you measured importance by the time you spend on an activity, listening would be your most important communication activity. Studies conducted from 1929 to 1980 show that listening is the most often used form of communication (occupying about 45 to 53 percent of your communication time), followed by speaking (about 16 to 30 percent), reading (about 16 to 17 percent), and writing (about 9 to 14 percent) (Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, & Holley, 1980; Rankin, 1929; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Werner, 1975; Wolvin & Coakley, 1982). This was true of high school and college students as well as of adults from a wide variety of fields. But, with the widespread use of the Internet these studies are dated and their findings of limited value. However, anecdotal evidence (certainly not conclusive in any way) suggests that listening is probably still the most used communication activity. Just think of how you spend your day; listening probably occupies a considerable amount of time. Listening is also important in your professional life; regardless of what profession you enter, you’ll always need the skills of effective listening (Allen, 1997; Salopek, 1999).

You’ll improve your listening if you listen actively, for total meaning, with empathy, and with an open mind. Additional suggestions for listening effectiveness may be found in a discussion of the “obstacles to effective listening” at www.ablongman.com/devito.

**Listen Actively**  The first step in listening improvement is to recognize that it isn’t a passive activity. You cannot listen without effort. Listening is a difficult process. In many ways it’s more demanding than speaking. In speaking you control the situation; you can talk about what you like in the way you like. In listening, however, you have to follow the pace, the content, and the language of the speaker.

The best preparation for active listening is to act like an active listener. Recall, for example, how your body almost automatically reacts to important news. Almost immediately you sit up straighter, cock your head toward the speaker, and remain relatively still and quiet. You do this almost reflexively because this is how you listen most effectively. This isn’t to say that you should be tense and uncomfortable, but only that your body should reflect your active mind. In listening actively:

- Use your listening time to think about what the speaker is saying, summarizing the speaker’s thoughts, formulating questions, drawing connections between what the speaker says and what you already know.
Work at listening. Listening is hard work so be prepared to participate actively. Avoid “the entertainment syndrome,” the expectation to be amused and entertained by a speaker (Floyd, 1985). Remove distractions or other interferences (newspapers, magazines, stereos) so that your listening task will have less competition.

Assume there’s value in what the speaker is saying. Resist assuming that what you have to say is more valuable than the speaker’s remarks.

Take notes if appropriate. In some instances, you’ll want to take notes while the speaker is speaking. Taking notes may be helpful if you want to ask a question about a specific item of information or if you want to include a specific statement in your critical evaluation.

Avoid becoming preoccupied with yourself. If you focus on yourself, you’ll invariably miss much of what the speaker is saying. Similarly, avoid becoming preoccupied with external issues, with what you did last Saturday or your plans for the evening. The more you entertain thoughts of external matters, the less effectively you listen.

**Listen for Total Meaning**  The meaning of a message isn’t only in the words; it’s also in the speaker’s nonverbal behavior. Sweating hands and shaking knees communicate as surely as do words.

The meanings communicated in a speech will also depend on what the speaker does not say. The speaker who omits references to the homeless or to drugs in a speech on contemporary social problems communicates important messages by these very omissions. For example, listeners might infer that the speaker is poorly prepared, that the speaker’s research was inadequate, or that the speaker is trying to fool the audience by not mentioning this. As a listener, therefore, be particularly sensitive to the meanings that significant omissions may communicate. As a speaker, recognize that most inferences that audiences draw from omissions are negative and will reflect negatively on your credibility and on the total impact of your speech. In listening for total meaning:

- Focus on both verbal and nonverbal messages. Recognize both consistent and inconsistent “packages” of messages and take these cues as guides for drawing inferences about the meaning the speaker is trying to communicate. Ask questions when in doubt.
- See the forest, then the trees. Connect the specifics to the speaker’s general theme rather than merely remembering isolated facts and figures.
- Balance your attention between the surface and the underlying meanings. Don’t disregard the literal (surface) meaning of the speech in your attempt to uncover the more hidden (deeper) meanings.
- Resist the temptation to filter out difficult or unpleasant messages: You don’t want to hear that something you believe is untrue or that people you care for are unpleasant, and yet these are the very messages you need to listen to with great care. These are the messages that will lead you to examine and reexamine your implicit and unconscious assumptions. If you filter out this kind of information, you risk failing to correct misinformation. You risk losing new and important insights.

**Listen with Empathy**  Try to feel what the speaker feels—empathize with the speaker. To empathize with others is to feel what they feel, to see the world
they see, to walk in their shoes (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). Of course you can never feel exactly what the speaker is feeling but you can try to feel something of what he or she is feeling. Listen to feelings as well as to thoughts and ideas; listen to what the speaker is feeling and thinking.

- See the speaker’s point of view. Before you can understand what the speaker is saying, you have to see the message from the speaker’s point of view. Try putting yourself in the role of the speaker and feel the topic from the speaker’s perspective.
- Understand the speaker’s thoughts and feelings. Don’t consider your listening task complete until you’ve understood what the speaker is feeling as well as thinking.
- Avoid “offensive listening.” Offensive listening is the tendency to listen to bits and pieces of information that will enable you to attack the speaker or find fault with something the speaker has said.
- Don’t distort messages because of the “friend-or-foe” factor—listening for positive qualities about friends.

In searching the Net, it’s easy to get lured into taking long detours. These are often excellent learning experiences and therefore shouldn’t be discouraged. Yet, it will help to keep your purpose clearly in mind—even to the point of writing it down—as you surf the Net or lurk among the chat groups.

Access your college library’s online catalog of books from home if you can; it will save you time if you can go to the library with your searches already completed. If your library subscribes to full-text databases (ProQuest or Lexis-Nexis are popular examples), which can be accessed from your home computer, you may be able to do all your research from the comfort of your home.

Learn what is available, where, and in what form. For example, spend a few hours in the library learning where some of the most useful materials are located or how they can be accessed. Learn the computer search facilities that are available at your college library and at neighboring public or college libraries for accessing newspapers, research articles, corporate reports, magazines, or any type of media you may wish to use. Learn, too, the search engines and search directories (see Research Link, Search Engines and Directories in Chapter 7) and how to use them efficiently. Just as you’d keep a list of the books you use in your research, keep a list of the websites that are most appropriate for topics you’re interested in researching. For example, if you were especially interested in health issues, then you’d want to become familiar with the National Institutes of Health’s website (http://www.nih.gov) or the National Library of Medicine’s website (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed). Bookmark the general web address for the site or your actual query. In this latter case, when you want to return to this search, the search engine will perform the varied operations it went through in the first place but it will pull up the up-dated sources.

One recommended shortcut to learning the available sources of information is to consult your librarian. Librarians are experts in the very issues that may be giving you trouble. They’ll be able to help you access biographical material, indexes of current articles, materials in specialized collections at other libraries, and a wide variety of computerized databases.
and negative qualities about enemies. For example, if you dislike Fred, then it will take added effort to listen objectively to Fred’s speeches or to criticism that might reflect positively on Fred.

**Listen with an Open Mind**  
Listening with an open mind is difficult. It isn’t easy to listen to arguments attacking your cherished beliefs. It isn’t easy to listen to statements condemning what you fervently believe. Listening often stops when such remarks are made. Yet in these situations it’s particularly important to continue listening openly and fairly. To listen with an open mind, try these suggestions.

- Avoid prejudging. Delay both positive and negative evaluation until you’ve fully understood the intention and the content of the message being communicated.

- Avoid filtering out difficult, unpleasant, or undesirable messages. Avoid distorting messages through oversimplification or leveling, the tendency to eliminate details and to simplify complex messages to make them easier to remember.

- Recognize your own biases. They may interfere with accurate listening and cause you to distort message reception through assimilation, the tendency to interpret what you hear (or think you hear) in terms of your own biases, prejudices, and expectations. Biases may also lead to sharpening—when an item of information takes on increased importance because it seems to confirm your stereotypes or prejudices.

- Avoid assimilation—the tendency to reconstruct messages so they reflect your own attitudes, prejudices, needs, and values. Assimilation is the tendency to hear relatively neutral messages (“Management plans to institute drastic changes in scheduling”) as supporting your own attitudes and beliefs (“Management is going to screw up our schedules again”).

- Whether in a lecture auditorium or in a small group, avoid prejudging some speeches as uninteresting or irrelevant. All speeches are, at least potentially, interesting and useful. If you prejudge them and then tune them out, you may not be proven wrong; however, you close yourself off from potentially useful information. Most important, perhaps, is that you’re not giving the other person a fair hearing.

**CRITICIZING SPEECHES**

In learning the art of public speaking, much insight will come from the criticism of others as well as from your criticism of others. This section considers the nature of criticism in a learning environment, the influence of culture on criticism, and the standards and principles for evaluating a speech and for making criticism easier and more effective. In connection with your study of speech criticism, visit one of the websites containing texts of famous speeches and consider how you might evaluate the speech. Suitable websites include Northwestern University’s Douglass website at [http://douglass.speech.nwu.edu](http://douglass.speech.nwu.edu) (see page 39), Texas A & M’s Presidential Rhetoric website at [www.tamu.edu/scom/pres/archive.html](http://www.tamu.edu/scom/pres/archive.html), the History Channel at [www.historychannel.com](http://www.historychannel.com) (search for “speeches”), or the Great American Speeches archive at [www.pbs.org/greatspeeches](http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches).
What Is Criticism?

Critics and criticism are essential parts of any art. *Criticism* comes into English from the Latin *criticus*, which means “able to discern,” “to judge.” *Speech criticism*, therefore, is the process of evaluating a speech, of rendering a judgment of its value. Note that there is nothing inherently negative about criticism; criticism may be negative, but it may also be positive.

Perhaps the major value of criticism in the classroom is that it helps to improve your public speaking skills. Through the constructive criticism of others, you’ll learn the principles of public speaking more effectively. You’ll be shown what you do well and what you could improve and, ideally, how you can improve. As a listener–critic you’ll also learn the principles of public speaking through assessing the speeches of others. Just as you learn when you teach, you also learn when you criticize.

When you give criticism—as you do in a public speaking class—you’re telling the speaker that you’ve listened carefully and that you care enough about the speech and the speaker to offer suggestions for improvement.

Of course, criticism can be difficult—for the critic (whether student or instructor) as well as for the person criticized. As a critic, you may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable to offer criticism. After all, you might think, “Who am I to criticize another person’s speech; my own speech won’t be any better.” Or you may be reluctant to offend, fearing that your criticism may make the speaker feel uncom-
comfortable. Or you may view criticism as a confrontation that will do more harm than good.

But, reconsider this view. By offering criticism you’re helping the speaker; you’re giving the speaker another perspective that should prove useful in future speeches. When you offer criticism, you’re not claiming to be a better speaker; you’re simply offering another point of view. It’s true that by offering criticism, you’re stating a position with which others may disagree. That’s one of the things that will make this class and the learning of the principles exciting and challenging.

Criticism is also difficult to receive. After working on a speech for a week or two and dealing with the normal anxiety that comes with giving a speech, the last thing you want is to stand in front of the class and hear others say what you did wrong. Public speaking is ego-involving and it’s normal to personalize criticism. But, if you learn how to give and how to receive criticism, it will become a helpful technique for improving your public speaking skills. Criticism can also serve as an important support mechanism for the developing public speaker, as a way of patting the speaker on the back for all the positive effort.

Culture and Criticism

There are vast cultural differences in what is considered proper when it comes to criticism. For example, criticism will be viewed very differently depending on whether members come from an individualist culture (which emphasizes the individual and places primary value on the individual’s goals) or a collectivist culture (which emphasizes the group and places primary value on the group’s goals).

Individual and collective tendencies are not mutually exclusive; this isn’t an all-or-none orientation but rather one of emphasis. For example, in a basketball game, you may follow an individualist orientation and compete with other mem-
bers of your basketball team for most baskets or most valuable player award. However, in a game you will act with a collective orientation to benefit the entire group, in this case, enabling your team to win the game. In actual practice both individual and collective tendencies will help you and your team achieve your goals. At times, however, these tendencies may conflict; for example, do you shoot for the basket and try to raise your own individual score or do you pass the ball to another player who is better positioned to score the basket and thus benefit your team?

Those who come from cultures that are highly individual and competitive (the United States, Germany, and Sweden are examples) may find public criticism a normal part of the learning process. Those who come from cultures that are more collective and therefore emphasize the group rather than the individual (Japan, Mexico, and Korea are examples) are likely to find giving and receiving public criticism uncomfortable. Thus, people from individual cultures may readily criticize others and are likely to expect the same “courtesy” from other listeners. After all, this person might reason, if I’m going to criticize your skills to help you improve, I expect you to help me in the same way. Persons from collective cultures, on the other hand, may feel that it’s more important to be polite and courteous than to help someone learn a skill. Cultural rules that maintain peaceful relations among the Japanese (Midooka, 1990) and politeness among many Asian cultures (Fraser, 1990) may conflict with the classroom cultural norm to express honest criticism. In some cultures, being kind to the person is more important than telling the truth, and so members may say things that are complimentary but untrue in a logical sense.

Collectivist cultures place a heavy emphasis on face-saving, on allowing people to always appear in a positive light (James, 1995). In these cultures, members may prefer not to say anything negative in public and may even be reluctant to say anything positive for fear that the omissions may be construed as negative. Japanese executives, for instance, are reluctant to say “no” in a business meeting for fear of offending the other person. But, their “yes,” properly interpreted in light of the context and the general discussion, may mean “no.” In cultures in which face-saving is especially important, communication rules such as the following would prevail:

- Don’t express negative evaluation in public; instead compliment the person.
- Don’t prove someone wrong, especially in public; express agreement even if you know the person is wrong.
- Don’t correct someone’s errors; don’t even acknowledge them.
- Don’t ask difficult questions lest the person not know the answer and lose face or be embarrassed; generally, avoid asking questions.

The difficulties that these differences may cause may be lessened if they’re discussed openly. Some people may become comfortable with public criticism once it’s explained that the cultural norms of most public speaking classrooms include public criticism just as they may incorporate informative and persuasive speaking or written outlines. Others may feel more comfortable offering written criticism as a substitute for oral and public criticism. Or, perhaps private consultations can be arranged.

Guidelines for Criticizing More Effectively

A useful standard to use in evaluating a classroom speech is its conformity to the principles of the art. Using this standard, you’d evaluate a speech positively when it
follows the principles of public speaking established by the critics, theorists, and practitioners of public speaking (as described throughout this text) and evaluate it negatively if it deviates from these principles. These principles include speaking on a subject that is worthwhile, relevant, and interesting to listeners; designing a speech for a specific audience; and constructing a speech that is based on sound research. A list of critical guidelines for analyzing public speeches that is based on these principles is presented on the inside covers of this book. [A discussion of other “standards for criticism” may be found at www.ablongman.com/devito.]

Before reading the specific suggestions for making critical evaluations a more effective part of the total learning process and avoiding some of the potentially negative aspects of criticism, take the following self-test, which asks you to identify what’s wrong with selected critical comments.

**TEST YOURSELF**

**What’s Wrong with These Critical Evaluations?**

For the purposes of this exercise, assume that each of the following 10 comments represents the critic’s complete criticism. What’s wrong with each?

1. I loved the speech. It was great. Really great.
2. The introduction didn’t gain my attention.
3. You weren’t interested in your own topic. How do you expect us to be interested?
4. Nobody was able to understand you.
5. The speech was weak.
6. The speech didn’t do anything for me.
7. Your position was unfair to those of us on athletic scholarships; we earned those scholarships.
8. I found four things wrong with your speech. First, . . .
9. You needed better research.
10. I liked the speech; we need more police on campus.

*How did you do?* Before reading the following discussion, try to explain why each of these statements is ineffective. Visualize yourself as the speaker receiving such
comments and ask yourself if these comments would help you in any way. If not, then
they are probably not very effective critical evaluations.

**What will you do?** To help you improve your criticism, try to restate the basic
meaning of each of these comments but in a more constructive manner.

**Stress the Positive** Egos are fragile and public speaking is extremely personal.
Speakers understand what Noel Coward meant when he said, “I love criticism just
as long as it’s unqualified praise.” Part of your function as a critic is to strengthen
the already positive aspects of someone’s public speaking performance. Positive
criticism is particularly important in itself, but it’s almost essential as a preface to
negative comments. There are always positive characteristics about any speech,
and it’s more productive to concentrate on these first. Thus, instead of saying (as in
the self-test) “The speech didn’t do anything for me,” tell the speaker what you
liked first, then bring up a weak point and suggest how it might be improved.

When criticizing a person’s second or third speech, it’s especially helpful if
you can point out specific improvements (“You really held my attention in this
speech,” “I felt you were much more in control of the topic today than in your
first speech”).

Remember, too, the irreversibility of communication. Once you say some-
thing, you can’t take it back. Remember this when offering criticism, especially crit-
icism that may be too negative. If in doubt, err on the side of gentleness.

**Be Specific** Criticism is most effective when it’s specific. Statements such as “I
thought your delivery was bad,” “I thought your examples were good,” or, as in
the self-test, “I loved the speech . . . Really great” and “The speech was weak” are
poorly expressed criticisms. These statements don’t specify what the speaker
might do to improve delivery or to capitalize on the examples used. In comment-
ing on delivery, refer to such specifics as eye contact, vocal volume, or whatever
else is of consequence. In commenting on the examples, tell the speaker why they
were good. Were they realistic? Were they especially interesting? Were they pre-
sented dramatically?

In giving negative criticism, specify and justify—to the extent that you can—
positive alternatives. Here’s an example.

I thought the way in which you introduced your statistics was vague. I wasn’t
sure where the statistics came from or how recent or reliable they were. It might
have been better to say something like “The U.S. Census figures for 2000 show
that . . .” In this way we would know that the statistics were as recent as possible
and the most reliable available.

**Be Objective** In criticizing a speech, transcend your own biases as best you
can, unlike our earlier example, “Your position was unfair . . .; we earned those
scholarships.” See the speech as objectively as possible. Assume, for example, that
you’re strongly for a woman’s right to an abortion and you encounter a speech
diametrically opposed to your position. In this situation, you’d need to take
special care not to dismiss the speech because of your own biases. Examine the
speech from the point of view of a detached critic, and evaluate, for example, the
validity of the arguments and their suitability to the audience, the language, and
the supporting materials. Conversely, take special care not to evaluate a speech
positively because it presents a position with which you agree, as in “I liked the speech; we need more police on campus.”

**Be Constructive** Your primary goal should be to provide the speaker with insight that will prove useful in future public speaking transactions. For example, to say “The introduction didn’t gain my attention” doesn’t tell the speaker how he or she might have gained your attention. Instead, you might say “The example about the computer crash would have more effectively gained my attention in the introduction.”

Another way you can be constructive is to limit your criticism. Cataloging a speaker’s weak points, as in “I found four things wrong with your speech,” will overwhelm, not help, the speaker. If you’re the sole critic, your criticism naturally will need to be more extensive. If you’re one of many critics, limit your criticism to one or perhaps two points. In all cases, your guide should be the value your comments will have for the speaker.

**Focus on Behavior** Focus criticism on what the speaker said and did during the actual speech. Try to avoid the very natural tendency to read the mind of the speaker, to assume that you know why the speaker did one thing rather than another. Compare the critical comments presented in Table 2.1. Note that those in the first column, “Criticism as Attack,” try to identify the reasons the speaker did as he or she did; they try to read the speaker’s mind. At the same time, they blame the speaker for what happened. Those in the second column, “Criticism as Support,” focus on the specific behavior. Note, too, that those in the first column are likely to encourage defensiveness; you can almost hear the speaker saying, “I was so interested in the topic.” Those in the second column are less likely to create defensiveness and are more likely to be appreciated as honest reflections of how the critic perceived the speech.

**Own Your Criticism** In giving criticism, own your comments; take responsibility for them. The best way to express this ownership is to use “I-messages” rather than “you-messages.” Instead of saying, “You needed better research,” say, “I would have been more persuaded if you used more recent research.”

### Table 2.1

**Criticism as Attack and as Support**

Can you develop additional examples to illustrate criticism as attack and as support?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criticism as Attack</th>
<th>Criticism as Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You weren’t interested in your topic.”</td>
<td>“I would have liked to see greater variety in your delivery. It would have made me feel that you were more interested.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You should have put more time into the speech.”</td>
<td>“I think it would have been more effective if you looked at your notes less.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You didn’t care about your audience.”</td>
<td>“I would have liked it if you looked more directly at me while speaking.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criticizing Speeches

Avoid attributing what you found wrong to others. Instead of saying, “Nobody was able to understand you,” say, “I had difficulty understanding you. It would have helped me if you had spoken more slowly.” Remember that your criticism is important precisely because it’s your perception of what the speaker did and what the speaker could have done more effectively. Speaking for the entire audience (“We couldn’t hear you clearly” or “No one was convinced by your arguments”) will not help the speaker, and it’s likely to prove demoralizing.

I-messages will also prevent you from using “should messages,” a type of expression that almost invariably creates defensiveness and resentment. When you say “You should have done this” or “You shouldn’t have done that,” you assume a superior position and imply that what you’re saying is correct and that what the speaker did was incorrect. On the other hand, when you own your evaluations and use I-messages, you’re giving your perceptions; it’s then up to the speaker to accept or reject them.

Recognize Your Ethical Obligations

Just as the speaker and listener have ethical obligations, so does the critic. Here are a few guidelines. First, the ethical critic separates personal feelings about the speaker from the evaluation of the speech. A liking for the speaker shouldn’t lead you to give positive evaluations of the speech, nor should disliking the speaker lead you to give negative evaluations of the speech.

Second, the ethical critic separates personal feelings about the issues from an evaluation of the validity of the arguments. The ethical critic recognizes the validity of an argument even if it contradicts a deeply held belief and at the same time recognizes the fallaciousness of an argument even if it supports a deeply held belief.

Third, the ethical critic is culturally sensitive, aware of his or her own ethnocentrism, and doesn’t negatively evaluate customs and forms of speech simply because they deviate from her or his own. Similarly, the ethical critic does not positively evaluate a speech just because it supports her or his own cultural beliefs and values. The ethical critic does not discriminate against or favor speakers simply because they’re of a particular sex, race, nationality, religion, age group, or affectional orientation.
In this chapter we looked at listening and criticism and offered suggestions for making your listening and your criticism more effective.

Listening is central to public speaking.◆ Listening is a five-stage process: (1) receiving the verbal and nonverbal messages, (2) understanding the speaker’s thoughts and emotions, (3) remembering and retaining the messages, (4) evaluating or judging the messages, and (5) responding or reacting to the messages.

◆ Cultural differences in language and speech, nonverbal behavioral differences, ethnocentrism, and gender can create listening difficulties.

◆ Among the principles for effective listening are these:
  • Listen actively (use listening time, work hard, assume value, and, if appropriate, take notes).
  • Listen for total meaning (focus on both verbal and nonverbal messages, connect specifics to the general thesis, attend to both surface and deep meanings).
  • Listen with empathy (see speaker’s point of view, understand speaker’s feelings and thoughts, avoid offensive listening).
  • Listen with an open mind (avoid prejudging and filtering out difficult messages, recognize your own biases).

Criticism is crucial to mastering the principles of public speaking.

◆ Criticism is a process of judging and evaluating a work and helps (1) to identify strengths and weaknesses and thereby helps you improve as a public speaker, (2) to identify standards for evaluating all sorts of public speeches, and (3) show that the audience is listening and is concerned about the speaker’s progress.

◆ Cultures differ in their views of criticism and in the rules they consider appropriate. For example, members from individualist cultures may find public criticism easier and more acceptable than people from collectivist cultures.

◆ Among the principles for effective criticism are these:
  • Stress the positive.
  • Be specific.
  • Be objective.
  • Be constructive.
  • Focus on behavior.
  • Own your criticism.
  • Recognize your ethical obligations.

Summary of Concepts and Skills

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Vocabulary Quiz

Listening and Criticism

Match the terms of listening and criticism with their definitions. Record the number of the definition next to the appropriate term.

1. Begins with receiving and ends with responding.
2. The tendency to evaluate the values and beliefs of one’s own culture as more positive or logical than those of another culture.
3. The tendency to reconstruct messages so that they reflect your own attitudes and prejudices.
4. Feeling what another is feeling, seeing as another sees.
5. The process of evaluating a work such as a speech.
6. A reconstructive rather than a reproductive process.
7. An orientation focusing on the needs of the social group rather than the individual.
8. An approach to public speaking criticism based on the degree to which the speech followed the rules and principles of the art.
9. The stages or steps involved in listening.
10. Messages that acknowledge the speaker’s responsibility for what he or she says.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>listening</th>
<th>receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ethnocentrism</td>
<td>assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empathy</td>
<td>criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-messages</td>
<td>collectivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conformity to the principles of the art</td>
<td>standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remembering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 Do You Really Remember What You Hear?

To illustrate the reproductive nature of memory, try to memorize the following list of 12 words (Glucksberg & Danks, 1975). Don’t worry about the order of the words. Only the number remembered counts. Take about 20 seconds to memorize as many words as possible. Don’t read any further until you’ve tried to memorize the list of words.

Word List
bed  dream  comfort
rest  wake  sound
awake  night  slumber
tired  eat  snore

Now close the book and write down as many of the words from this list as you can remember.

How did you do? If you’re like my students, you not only remembered a good number of the words on the list but you also “remembered” at least one word that was not on the list: sleep. You did not simply reproduce the list; you reconstructed it. In this case you gave the list a meaning and part of that meaning included the word sleep. This happens with all types of messages; the messages are reconstructed into a meaningful whole and in the process a distorted version of what was said is often “remembered.”

2.2 Understanding Your Own Listening Barriers

Most people put on blinders when they come upon particular topics or particular spokespersons. Sometimes these blinders prevent information from getting through fairly and objectively. For example, you may avoid listening to certain people or reading certain newspapers because they frequently contradict your beliefs. Sometimes these blinders color the information you take in, influencing you to take a positive view of some information (because it may support one of your deeply held beliefs) and a negative view of other information (because it may contradict such beliefs).

Read over the following situations and identify any barriers that may get in the way of your listening to these people and these messages fairly and objectively. Some situations may seem likely and others extremely unlikely. For this exercise, however, assume that all speakers are speaking on the topic indicated and that you’re in the audience. Ask yourself such questions as the following about each of the 10 situations presented below: What are your initial expectations? How credible do you find the speaker—even before he or she begins to speak? Will you begin listening with a positive, negative, or neutral attitude? How will these attitudes influence your listening? What will you say to yourself as you begin listening to the speaker? Will this influence what you receive, understand, and remember of the speech? Will this influence how you evaluate and respond to the speech? What do you think your final assessment of the speech will be? On a 10-point scale (10 = extremely sure; 1 = extremely unsure) how sure are you that this will be your assessment? Can you identify at least one barrier that you (or someone else) might set up for each of these speech situations?

[Speech]  
XXX Has Got to Go

[Critical Thinking Questions]
What do you think of the title of the speech? Visualizing yourself as a listener, how would the opening comment make you
Broad and Fifth Streets. My parents, who are retired teachers, are protesting it and so am I. My parents are organizing a protest for the next weekend.

There must be hundreds of XXX video stores in the country and they all need to be closed down. I have a lot of reasons.

First, my parents think it should be closed down. My parents are retired teachers and have organized protests over the proposed new homeless shelter and to prevent the city from making that park on Elm Street. So, they know what they’re doing.

The XXX video place is un-Christian. No good Christian people would ever go there. Our minister is against it and is joining in the protest.

These stores bring crime into the neighborhood. I have proof of that. Morristown’s crime increased after the XXX video store opened. And in Martinsville, where they got rid of the video store, crime did not increase. If we allow the video store in our own town, then we’re going to be like Morristown and our crime is going to increase.

These stores make lots of garbage. The plastic wrappings from the videos will add to our already overextended and overutilized landfill. And a lot of them are going to wind up as litter on the streets.

The XXX Video House stays open 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. People will be forced to work at all hours and on Sunday and that’s not fair. And the store will increase the noise level at night with cars pulling up and all.

The XXX Video House—that’s it’s name, by the way—doesn’t carry regular videos which most people want. So, why do we want them?

The XXX Video House got a lease from an owner who doesn’t even live in the community, someone by the name of, well, it’s an organization called XYX Management. And their address is Carlson Place in Jeffersonville. So, they don’t even live here.

A neighboring store owner says he thinks the store is in violation of several fire laws. He says they have no sprinkler system and no metal doors to prevent the spread of a fire. So, he thinks they should be closed down, too.

Last week on Oprah three women were on and they were in the XXX movie business and they were all on drugs and had been in jail and they said it all started when they went into the porno business. One woman wanted to be a teacher, another wanted to be a nurse, and the other wanted to be a beautician. If there weren’t any XXX video stores then there wouldn’t be a porn busi-
ness and, you know, pornography is part of organized crime and so if you stop pornography you take a bite out of crime.

One of the reasons I think it should be closed is that the legitimate video stores—the ones that have only a small selection of XXX movies somewhere in the back—will lose business. And if they continue to lose business, they’ll leave the neighborhood and we’ll have no video stores.

That’s a lot of reasons against XXX movie houses. I have a quote here: Reason is “a portion of the divine spirit set in a human body.” Seneca.

In conclusion and to wrap it up and close my speech, I want to repeat and say again that the XXX video stores should all be closed down. They corrupt minors. And they’re offensive to men and women and especially women. I hope you’ll all protest with the Marshalls—my mother and father—and there’ll be lots of others there too. My minister, I think, is coming too.

Do you accept the argument that there would be no pornography business without video stores? What would have to be proven to you before you accept this connection? How do you respond to the expression “Take a bite out of crime”?

Is the speaker implying that this is the real reason against XXX video stores? Do you start wondering if the speaker is against XXX video stores—as seemed in the last argument—or just against stores that sell these exclusively? What effect does this impression have on your evaluation of the speaker’s credibility and the speaker’s thesis?

How do you feel about the number of “reasons”? Would you have preferred fewer reasons more fully developed or more reasons? What purpose does this quotation serve?

Might the speaker have introduced it differently? Now, what is the speaker’s thesis? What do you think of the argument that XXX video stores are offensive? What effect does this argument have been stated here in the conclusion? Do you think you’d go to the protest? Why?