

# 2

## LISTENING SKILLS

Derek is halfway through with his first semester of college and is very frustrated with school. He has always been a good student. In fact, he graduated from high school with a 3.85 unweighted GPA. His teachers told him that college would be harder than high school and he would have to put forth more effort to earn the same high grades, and he believed them.

He has been very responsible about his classes: He has perfect attendance in each course, copies down every word on his professors' PowerPoint presentations, and makes sure his phone is on silent so he does not disrupt the class with noise as he entertains himself between slides. He even memorizes all of his notes before exams. Yet he is not doing well. Derek feels as if his notes rarely cover even half of what is on any of his exams.

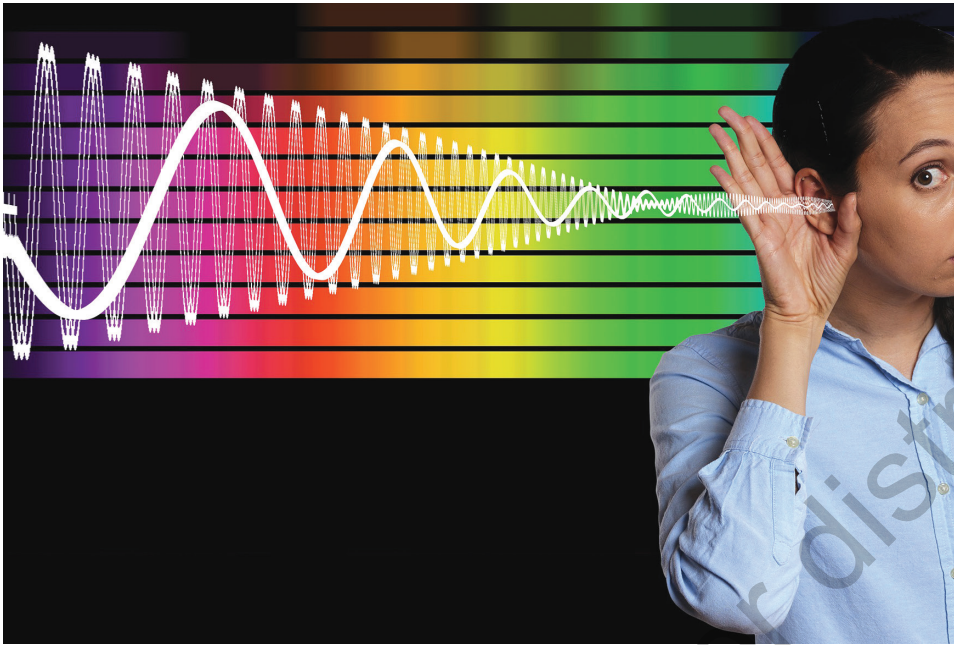
### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Summarize the difference between listening and hearing.
2. Explain the listening process.
3. Recognize barriers to listening.
4. Explain tactics for becoming better listeners.
5. Demonstrate effective note-taking skills.

### LISTENING VERSUS HEARING

Derek is hearing all of the information presented in every class, but he is not listening to any of it. Hearing and listening are two separate processes (Kline, 1996). It is completely possible to hear an entire conversation or lecture and not listen to a word of it. **Hearing** is a physiological process in which sound waves bounce off our eardrums, which translates into your brain as auditory information. **Listening** is the process of actively interpreting meaning from those sounds, based on what is known about the speaker and the context.

Retaining information by simply hearing it is barely more useful than laying your head on a book and trying to acquire that book's information through osmosis. This is why simply attending class daily is not enough to ensure learning or retention. Nor is mindlessly copying down the words the professor has projected onto a screen. Good learners are active listeners. Good employees are active listeners. Good leaders are active listeners. The ability to listen well is one of the most important characteristics of a good manager or leader (Lloyd et al., 2017).



Hearing, the process of soundwaves bouncing off one's eardrums and being registered by the brain as noise, is not the same as listening.

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### **Pseudolistening**

In 1957, an article focused on the importance of listening skills for career success noted, “It can be stated, with practically no qualification, that people in general do not know how to listen. They have ears that hear very well, but seldom have they acquired the necessary aural skills which would allow those ears to be used effectively for what is called *listening*” (Nichols & Stevens, 1957, p. 6). Those words are as woefully true today as they were when published over 65 years ago.

Before we talk about how to listen effectively, it is important to establish the things we all do to fool ourselves into thinking we are listening but really are not. Intentionally choosing to hear rather than listen to someone's words is called **pseudolistening**. Pseudolistening is not an effective way to communicate, but most of us engage in it regularly, missing much of the meaning embedded within the messages sent to us. There are four common ways that we engage in pseudolistening:

- **Listening for your turn to speak:** At times during a conversation, we do not actually listen to what the other person is saying, but rather we wait for our turn to say what we have been waiting to say. When we do this, we are not actually listening to the messages we are receiving; we are listening for a pause in conversation where we can jump in with our own thoughts. Further, when we do this we do not pay attention to the messages' content. An example of this would be starting to speak when someone takes a big breath rather than waiting for them to finish their message.
- **Defensive listening:** Sometimes when we are emotional, we listen not to what the other person is actually saying, but for something we can perceive as an attack or quickly disagree with. Doing this often obscures the words' meaning, resulting in

us misunderstanding messages we have the tools to interpret accurately. Defensive listening happens when we respond to tone rather than message or twist the meaning of someone's words. For example, think of a friend or relative who likes to tease you in a playful way. If you are engaged in defensive listening during communication with this person, you will respond to one of their normal, playful teases not as though you are amused or annoyed, but as though the tease is an aggressive comment.

- **Mindless listening:** This is simply pretending to listen. During mindless listening, we are trying not to hurt others' feelings by obviously not listening or by disengaging, but we are also not paying attention to what they are actually saying. We engage in mindless listening when we are disinterested in what is being said or when we think we already know what is going to be said. Giving someone lots of nonverbal feedback (e.g., eye contact, head nodding) while thinking about anything other than what they are saying is mindless listening.
- **Multitasking:** If you are doing something else while claiming to listen, you are not really listening. Listening is an active process. You cannot actively be doing something else and listening. People are actually not as good at multitasking as they think that they are. Typically, people who think they are multitasking are actually task switching at such a fast rate that they have fooled themselves into thinking that they are multitasking. For example, if you are checking social media rather than paying attention to the speaker in a Zoom meeting or class, you are not actively listening to the speaker; you are pseudolistening.

#### Pro Tip 2.1

If you are not sure whether you have a habit of pseudolistening, ask a trusted friend. We cannot become better communicators without recognizing our weaknesses.

These behaviors each constitute a form of pseudolistening because they fail to put the speaker at the center of your attention. Listening is not about you. Listening is an active process of focusing on another person. If your primary concern is what you are going to say or do, you are not listening.

## EFFECTIVE LISTENING BEHAVIORS

Effective listening is an active, involved process. In active listening, we do not simply listen to the words literally coming out of a person's mouth. We consider their tone of voice, facial expressions, what we know about them, and the context (surroundings) to interpret meaning from the words (Kline, 1996). Listening is a multistage process:

1. First, you must choose to be mindful. **Mindfulness** is a state of intentional focus. You must be in a state of mindfulness to be able to listen to another person.
2. Second, you must hear the message. If you are being mindful, you will be aware of words you may not have understood or missed so that you can ask for clarity. Mindfulness is what allows you to be attuned to the details of a message when you hear it.
3. Third, you must prioritize the information you hear. Not all sounds and words are necessary to make meaning from messages. You need to select and focus on the important information. This is where, for example, you consider whether the nonverbal delivery of the message changes the meaning of the words.

4. Fourth, you must sort the information. In this phase, you consider all of the information you know about the person and topic. Sort the new information you have received into those categories to access your background knowledge. This process informs your interpretation of the message.
5. Fifth, you must interpret the message based on the combination of verbal and nonverbal cues you recognize as important as well as what you know about the person and the context in which the message is delivered. Finally, at this fifth stage, you gain meaning from the message.
6. Sixth, at last you respond to the information. In a conversation, this is where you reply. In Derek's situation from the opening vignette, this is where he decided what to write down in addition to what was on the PowerPoint slide when he was actually listening rather than pseudolistening to the lectures.

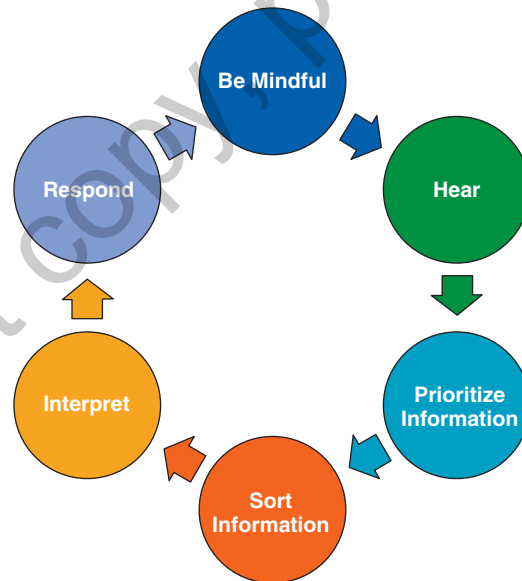
## The Stages of Listening

### Listening Considering Context and Nonverbals

Of all of the stages of listening (see Figure 2.1), perhaps the most difficult is Stage 4 in which you consider all of the conditions under which the message is delivered. This is impossible to do effectively unless you are being very mindful. Imagine this scenario as an example:

*A person you have been working with for the last month seems abnormally quiet today. This concerns you a bit, so you ask if everything is all right. The response is "I'm fine."*

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Stages of Listening

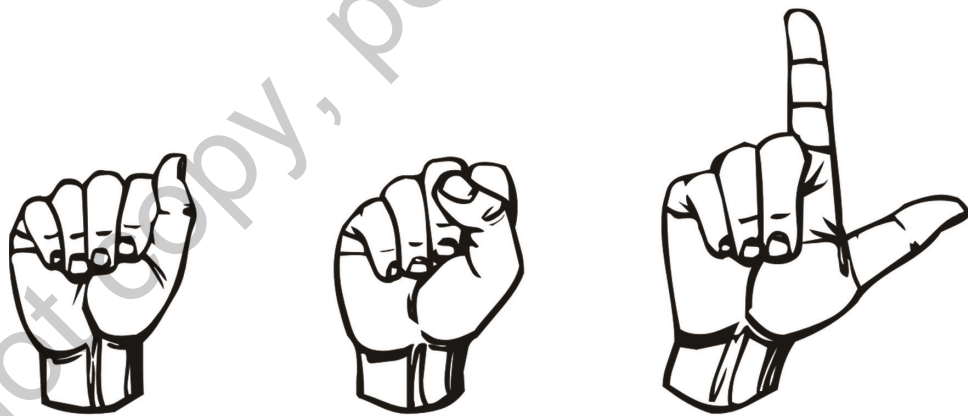


In this scenario, "I'm fine" can mean a wide variety of things based on the context. Are other people nearby and able to hear? If so, the context in which the message is sent may prevent an explanation, so the real message may be, "I cannot talk about what is happening right now." What was the tone of voice like when "I'm fine" was uttered? Did the person sound fine but

tired? If so, then maybe “I’m fine” really does mean that nothing major is wrong, and at worst, a nap is needed. Does the tone of voice sound strained? If so, “I’m fine” could mean they are not ready to talk, but things are definitely not fine. Responding to only the words a person uses means responding to only a very small part of the message. In fact, words typically make up the lowest percentage of meaning in a message (Mehrabian, 1981).

At first, that may sound strange—that the smallest part of listening is encoding the words that are said. This is because most of the time we colloquially use the word “listening” to refer to “hearing.” If listening were something that only involved the encoding of spoken words, then it would be impossible for individuals who are hard of hearing to listen. We know that is far from true! No one with a hearing impairment is incapable of listening; their barrier is only with the physical step of hearing the message, which can be accommodated through reading lips or signing. In fact, in Deaf culture, it is even more critical to pay close attention to nonverbal delivery than for individuals who listen through hearing (Kelly & Denton, 2018). This is because sign languages like **American Sign Language (ASL)**, which is the official signed language of the United States, have far fewer synonyms than spoken languages such as English. In ASL, if speakers want to convey that they are slightly upset or furious, the sign is the same; it is the nonverbal behaviors that surround the sign that specify the meaning.

Just as in ASL, we use nonverbal behaviors to specify our messages in spoken languages. We use our facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and rhythm to provide greater clarity to our messages. Effective listening requires processing all of that information along with the words themselves.



“American Sign Language” is often abbreviated as “ASL.”

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## BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

There are several reasons that we have trouble listening. Some of these barriers to listening are our own doing, but some are beyond our control and can prevent us from listening well even when we are being mindful.

- **External noise:** It is impossible to listen effectively if you cannot hear the message clearly. Loud noises in the vicinity, someone speaking softly, or even your own health (such as an ear infection) can prevent you from hearing well, which hinders listening.
- **Internal noise:** It is hard to be mindful when we have internal distractions. If you are hungry, too hot, too cold, nauseated, or the like, it is hard to concentrate, making it difficult to stay mindful. These types of distractions are the internal noises that hinder or prevent listening.
- **Working memory depletion:** Your working memory, which is your cognitive functioning power, is constrained, meaning that you only have so much processing power to use at once (Kelly et al., 2015). The act of listening draws upon your working memory. The more complex the message, the more working memory it takes. When messages become too complex or stretch across too much time, your working memory depletes to a point at which you cannot concentrate any more. Have you ever left a lecture and felt as if your brain was actually tired from what you just learned? If so, you noticed that your working memory was too depleted to maintain mindfulness and needed time to recharge.
- **Failure to try:** The only barrier to listening that we control from moment to moment is our own effort. If you want to listen, you have to make a conscious decision to put in the effort of listening. Sometimes we stop trying to listen to a person based on communication style (e.g., speaking too fast, using complex language, or having an accent). In these cases, you switch from listening to pseudolistening or only hearing. Yet the longer you actively listen to someone, the easier they are to understand, meaning that the real reason we do not understand is our own lack of trying.

**Pro Tip 2.2**

Lack of sleep also depletes the working memory. Effective listeners are typically well rested.

There are many barriers to listening effectively. Some of them are external, but most are those we create for ourselves. Eating and sleeping well help you stay healthy and keep your working memory charged. If you do that, then the biggest barrier you will face will be your own effort.

## LISTENING EFFECTIVELY

Scholars have long recognized that listening is perhaps *the* most important skill a burgeoning professional can learn. Good listeners are more productive and satisfying to collaborate with (Brownell, 1990). Without constantly needing to seek clarification for details, good listeners make better use of their own time, their supervisor's time, and their collaborators' time. They are also far less likely to get on their colleagues' nerves by asking the same question multiple times. In fact, when coworkers decide whether they think you are a competent member of the organization, roughly a third of their judgment is going to be based upon your listening skills alone versus other characteristics like punctuality or politeness (Haas & Arnold, 1995). Listening skills are also perceived as a hallmark of whether someone cares about your well-being as a person or believes your thoughts to be valuable (Bareiss, 2021).

Becoming a better listener is no small feat. Listening is a skill that can be cultivated across a lifetime. Effective listening is all about actively paying attention to the message sender's verbal and nonverbal messages. That requires your dedicated concentration in the moment. However, there are a few things you can do outside of those moments to improve your listening skills:



Effective listening means paying attention to the verbal and nonverbal components of a message.

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### Pro Tip 2.3

If you do invest in a word-of-the-day app, you will remember the new words better if you make yourself use the word once on the day you learn it.

- **Expand your lexicon.** Your **lexicon** is the total collection of words that you know and can use in conversation. The more words you know, the less time you will spend draining your working memory by trying to discern meaning, which ultimately makes effective listening easier (Vandergrift, 2004). Spending more time reading or getting a word-of-the-day app are simple ways to expand your lexicon.
- **Force yourself to be quiet.** For those of us who like to talk, it is hard to stay quiet sometimes. However, it is impossible to learn to listen better when we are unable to break our habit of anxiously awaiting our turn to speak. If you are a talker, before entering your next conversation make a decision to commit to being quiet. When we purposefully choose to spend time being quiet during a conversation, we tend to listen more (Johnson et al., 2003). This decision cannot be made during a conversation, though. If you decide to stop talking in the middle of a conversation, your cocommunicators will be confused and think something is wrong. Forcing yourself to be quiet is a premeditated tactic.
- **Use other-centric communication.** Another premeditated listening effectiveness strategy appropriate for interpersonal interactions only is deciding in advance to make the conversation about the other person. Decide in advance that rather than weighing in on the topic of conversation you will make responses by summarizing what the other(s) have said to check for clarity or by asking questions to understand more about their ideas. This is not always an appropriate tactic for business communication. For example, if you go into a meeting where you are expected to present your own ideas and instead only ask for others to elaborate on their own, that may be perceived as trying to avoid proffering your own ideas. This is why other-centric communication is a good listening practice only in interpersonal contexts.

The more practice you have at intentionally listening well, the easier and more natural it becomes. In the moment, the first step to becoming a better listener is recognizing when you pseudolisten so that you can choose to do better. If you choose to be other-centric in your listening, you are going to have ample opportunities to find those moments of pseudolistening.



Practicing effective listening in school is the best preparation for effective listening in the workplace.

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The value of practicing these skills cannot be overemphasized in preparation for the workforce. Good listeners have more upward mobility (Beatty et al., 1984). People who listen well are seen as more competent and dependable. Because of this, they are more likely to be promoted within a company. It is good that listeners are the people likely to be promoted because good listeners also make better supervisors than poor listeners. Employees are less likely to feel burnout or leave their company if they feel their supervisor actually listens to them (Lloyd et al., 2015). Supervisors who listen are also more aware of the work that takes place at each level and across divisions within an organization and can prevent the **siloining effect**, when work is duplicated because employees of the same company are unaware of what other employees are doing. For example, supervisors in finance know what is happening in strategic communication, marketing, operations, and supply chain departments so that they are not running calculations or generating spreadsheet numbers that already exist elsewhere. Supervisors who are good listeners are more creative in the workplace, having a working knowledge of the sum of working parts; they also have more satisfied employees (Itzhakov & Kluger, 2018).

What all of this means is that if you have any aspirations at all throughout your career to be promoted, work as a supervisor, or become an entrepreneur, you will constantly be in



your own way if you do not learn to listen effectively. It is common for people to dismiss listening as a learnable skill because it is one that we are born able to do. However, as with all other aspects of communication, you can improve your listening skills. The first step in improving your listening skills is to make sure you understand your own listening behaviors and distinguish between your true efforts to listen versus your efforts to pretend you are listening.

## NOTE-TAKING SKILLS

You will spend your entire life taking notes. Note-taking is not just a skill you need to get through school. You will spend your career taking notes in meetings and find yourself taking many notes to organize your home life when you are completely financially responsible for yourself and others. Without effective note-taking skills, it is hard to be successful.

### Pro Tip 2.4

You will remember significantly more of what you have heard if you take notes by hand rather than typing.

Source: Allen et al., 2020

Note-taking is a direct product of listening. Copying down the words on the PowerPoint is not taking notes—it is just copying. It is a mindless process. Taking notes involves listening actively to the speaker and writing down your interpretation of the messages. In other words, good note-taking cannot happen without being mindful, which means it takes cognitive and physical effort.

Now, this is not to say that if you find yourself in a position in which a speaker is using a visual aid that you should not write down whatever information is provided on that aid. However, you should assume that the words on the visual represent only the main idea and that all of the details will be delivered verbally. Imagine, for example, that your professor is giving a presentation of this chapter. A PowerPoint slide that accompanies the steps to listening effectively may look like the one in Figure 2.2.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ PowerPoint Slide

### Listening Effectively

1. Be mindful
2. Hear the message
3. Prioritize the information
4. Sort the information
5. Interpret
6. Respond

You can and should write down everything on that slide as quickly as possible, but you should leave yourself room to write additional notes. For example, your initial notes based just on this slide may look like this:

## Effective Listening

1. Be mindful
2. Hear the message
3. Prioritize the information
4. Sort the Information
5. Interpret
6. Respond

Doing this will allow you to fill in the details as you listen to the lecture. Your goal should not be to write down every word, but rather to write down the information you perceive to be most important (i.e., the information you have prioritized). Paraphrasing in your own words is best because it forces you to think more deeply about what you are writing (Czarnecki et al., 1998). So your completed notes may look like this:

## Effective Listening

—Different than hearing, which is just receiving sounds in your ear

—An active process

1. Be mindful
  - Choose to focus
  - Intentionally pay attention to verbal and nonverbal parts of the message
2. Hear the message
  - Get the sounds
  - Active listening is making sure you hear it all, so ask for repetition or for the speaker to be louder when needed
3. Prioritize the information
  - Pick out which parts of the message are important
  - Messages have verbal and nonverbal components to consider
4. Sort the information
  - Sort the information based on context and what you know about the person
  - Organize the information based on what you know about the topic
5. Interpret
  - Consider the *use* of the words rather than the literal words
  - Deduce what the message means
6. Respond
  - Ask for clarity or paraphrase the information
  - Further the conversation

In our opening vignette, Derek was clearly not actively listening while taking notes—meaning that if you borrowed Derek’s notes you would probably find them to be very easy to follow but extremely sparse. Ironically, if you borrowed notes instead from someone who engages in active listening, you may find those notes to be a bit difficult to understand or follow what was covered in class. This is because active listeners do not write down the information they already know so they can use their focus and energy to paraphrase the new information. To save time, active listeners typically write down only notes that they do not consider to be their own knowledge prior to the note-taking. This means that someone taking notes on a subject they are already very familiar with will not be a good person to borrow notes from, even if they did actively listen throughout class. Instead, the most thorough notes are produced from skilled active listeners who are learning new material.

## INSIDER INSIGHTS

MCKINLEY BRYSON

### Owner and Creator, Lucky Bat Paper Co.

I am the owner and creator of Lucky Bat Paper Co., a small Baltimore-based business that sells art prints, cards, and gifts. I learned a lot about the role of audience analysis in selling my art in the early days of Lucky Bat. In the beginning, I made only face-to-face sales at local farmers’ markets with the assistance of my husband, Andy. Andy and I have very different personalities. He is the outgoing joker who has never met a stranger, while I am the reserved, soft-spoken half of our pair. From the first market event, it became obvious that sales improved by paying attention to which customers worked best with Andy’s communication style or my own.

Some customers were outgoing and enjoyed talking about products with Andy. The nonverbal patterns of these patrons became clear early on as they walked in talking loudly, standing tall, and boldly approaching the tables to flip through the products, starting at whatever section most interested them. These customers appreciated conversation and offers for assistance. They liked it when Andy rushed up to them to begin a jovial conversation and appreciated when he offered to do things like hold up the two prints in their hands so that they could hold up different third options against them for buy-two-get-one-free sales.

Some customers were quickly run off by such approaches, though. The customers who entered the market tent making every effort to avoid eye contact by hunching their shoulders, angling their bodies away from the table, and starting to browse discretely from an edge of the displays did not want to be approached. In fact, they were hesitant to touch anything on the table for what seemed to be fear that someone would offer to help them. These customers liked it best when I quietly said only “hello” and waited until they seemed committed to a thorough browse before adding, “Let me know if you have questions.”

When we consistently paid attention to the nonverbal behaviors of customers, sales increased. The audience analysis went a layer deeper than just trying to avoid scaring off our shyer customers, though. I also learned quickly that it was through nonverbal behaviors that customers would tell me what they wanted. Certainly, noticing which products sold told me what they liked. Yet paying attention to what multiple people stopped to consider carefully



only to pass over told me which products were *almost* what customers wanted: Perhaps they liked the content but not the colors or the colors but not the content. These patterns of behavior told me what variations of my creations to try next to better provide what customers were looking for.

You cannot give decent customer service without effective listening. Paying attention to what the customer says beyond the words they use is sometimes the most important information you need to make sales. Customers will always tell you what they want—sometimes without words.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Listening is an effortful process that is key to success in both school and careers. Listening is one of the most critical but often underdeveloped communication skills. You likely have the capacity to listen to up to 450 words per minute (Carver, 1973), but you speak no more than half that rate (Yuan et al., 2006). Humans have evolved to be able to listen to more messages than they send because listening is more critical to your social survival.

## KEYWORDS

American Sign Language (ASL) (p. 16)

Hearing (p. 12)

Lexicon (p. 18)

Listening (p. 12)

Mindfulness (p. 14)

Pseudolistening (p. 13)

Siloing effect (p. 19)

## ACTIVITIES

1. Divide into partners. Take turns telling one another a story while the other writes. Partner 1 should tell the story of how they chose to come to this school, how they chose their major, and whether they would have made any choices differently if they had to make these decisions all over again while Partner 2 writes down as much information as they can recall from this chapter. When Partner 2 stops writing, Partner 1 should stop speaking. Partner 2 should then paraphrase for Partner 1 everything that they said. Partner 1 should then let Partner 2 know roughly what percentage of what was said that Partner 2 was able to recall. Writing from memory requires roughly the same amount of working memory as casually scanning social media. This gives a very rough indication of what percentage of a message is not listened to during multitasking activities. Once this process is complete, switch roles and repeat the activity.
2. Get into groups with at least six people. Five people will need a sheet of paper. One person will not, and this person will be the instructor. The five team members who are not the instructor should sit so that they cannot see one another's paper (sitting in a circle with every paper holder's back to the center of the circle makes this easiest). Once everyone is settled, the instructor should begin giving instructions for drawing. These instructions should be of only simple shapes, but the location on the page should be specific. For example, "In the center of the page, draw a small box. Now, to the right of the box, draw

a medium circle.” Continue instructions until at least 10 shapes have been drawn. Then the instructor should collect all of the pages, shuffle them, and present them to the team at random. Compare not only how different effort in listening affected the drawings but also how perception of size and shape affected the drawings.

Look ahead to the next chapter you will cover in this class. Glance through the chapter to identify what the major topics will likely be. Set up a template to take notes for this chapter, making headings for the main topics, including any definitions of keywords, and leaving space for your additional notes.

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