Chapter Thirteen

Listening and Taking Notes

Debate fosters excellence in speaking and critical thinking, but success in competitive debate depends primarily on good critical listening and note-taking skills. Debaters need to develop proficiency in listening because it is a fundamental communication skill in debate. Inadequate listening skills will contribute to unclear dialogue in the debate and will create significant difficulties for the judges and the participants. Good listening habits are necessary for providing clear and insightful responses to arguments, and debaters can develop and enhance listening skills through practice. While participating in debate is an excellent way to practice listening skills, explaining some of the basics of listening and note-taking to beginning debaters in advance of practice debates or tournaments is an important aspect of this text. This chapter will discuss techniques for listening that can help both debaters and take better notes and provide clearer responses to arguments.

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Listening in Debates

The first thing that debaters should understand is the distinction between listening and hearing. Hearing is the physiological process of taking in sound waves through the ear canal. Listening not only involves the physiological process but also includes the mental process of understanding what is being taken in, making sense of it, and formulating a response. Listening involves processing the auditory cues being received. Listening is obviously important to a good debate because the mental processing of what is being heard fosters the critical thinking skills that generate a good debate.
As an active process, listening requires effort and energy. Listening is often viewed as a passive activity. That viewpoint regarding listening is particularly prevalent in oral communication activities like public speaking and debate. In speaking situations where one person is doing all or most of the talking, the popular perception is that one individual (the speaker) is applying all of the energy and effort. However, careful listening demands just as much energy and effort. The mind has to be fully engaged in the communication situation to carefully absorb and process information. The notion that listening is a passive activity is one myth about listening that needs to be dispelled.

A second common misconception about listening is that it comes naturally and is easy for everyone to do without any formal training. Of the major communication skills emphasized in most educational systems throughout the world, listening typically gets the least attention. Students receive focused training on how to read, how to write, and, although less often, on how to speak. However, very little if any time is devoted to teaching students how to listen. Debate can help address this deficit in communication skills training by providing students opportunities to practice listening skills in both a supportive and competitive environment.

An awareness of the common misconceptions about listening can help improve debates by maintaining the quality of dialogue. In Worlds-Style debate, every speaker after the first speaker in the debate has to provide some refutation of the previous speaker’s arguments. And, even the first speaker needs to listen carefully in order to be able to raise points of information. Active listening, the process of investing energy and effort into listening critically to the arguments presented by the previous speakers, allows debaters to strengthen their cases by formulating appropriate responses to the previously presented arguments.

**Paraphrasing**

One simple listening skill that debate students can and should practice is paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is simply restating someone else’s argument using your own words. A good paraphrase is not simply a repetition of the complete argument presented by the previous speaker, but is a concise summary of the major claim or position that the previous speaker presented. The goal of paraphrasing is not to change the intent of the message or to manipulate the message, but rather to provide a concise and accurate version of the original argument.

As a listening skill, paraphrasing is important. During the round, debaters should silently paraphrase as a way to take mental note of the various arguments that are being presented by other speakers. Paraphrasing is also important as a speaking skill because it is also the first element in refutation. As a component of refutation, the paraphrase should be more descriptive than evaluative. A complete point of refutation will, of course, also include evaluation and critique, but, at the stage of paraphrasing, the focus should be on providing a simple paraphrase that is a short summary of the argument that the previous speaker presented. As noted in Chapter 10, the first of the four-step process of refutation involves identifying the argument made by the other debater. That identification should be a simple paraphrase.
For instance, assume that a speaker makes the following argument:

*China should not ban smoking in public places because it will lead to personal economic losses for some of our most vulnerable workers. Shopkeepers, tobacco factory workers, and workers on tobacco farms will all lose jobs or income. Since the livelihood of so many of our poorest workers is tied to the tobacco industry, we must reject any ban that will put those employees at risk.*

In that case, a simple paraphrase of the argument would be as follows:

*My opponent states that a ban on smoking in China will create economic losses for workers in selected occupations.*

The paraphrase of the argument is neutral in tone because the goal here is simply to identify the specific argument for judges and the other debaters. Later in the debate, when referring to this same argument, the paraphrase can be even more succinct:

*The opposition argues that economic losses will result from the proposed ban.*

Debaters should avoid unnecessary details when paraphrasing during refutation. Debaters should avoid taking too much of their own speaking time summarizing the arguments for the other side. A good paraphrase in refutation is a short summary that lets the judges and audience members know which argument the speaker is addressing. However, debaters should avoid unnecessary details (such as repeating all the previous speaker’s evidence) since the majority of time in refutation should be spent on developing unique arguments for one’s own side in the debate.

After an argument has been paraphrased several times by different speakers throughout the round, a few key words, such as “economic loss,” are often sufficient to identify the argument in a point of summary or refutation. Also, a short keyword paraphrase such as “economic loss” is precisely the type of information that debaters should place in their notes about the round.

**Flowing the Debate**

With 56 minutes of speaking in a Worlds-Style debate, participants have the difficult task of tracking many arguments on both sides of the issue. Careful listening is an important first step. However, successful debaters and judges also have to develop methods for note taking; this process of note taking often is called *flowing the debate.* While no single method for flowing a debate exists, most techniques used by debaters offer some way of tracking both the contributions of individual speakers in the round and the development of the dialogue.
throughout the round. Specifically, flowing allows the note-taker to see how individual arguments are handled throughout the various waves of refutation during the round.

Debaters and judges can take several important steps to enhance their listening skills, to make them more proficient at flowing the debate, and to synthesize information. First, debaters need to listen for key ideas, patterns, transitions, and the other structural elements of each participant’s speech. Listen for signposts (words such as “first,” “second,” and “third”), transitions, main tag lines or titles for arguments, as well as previews and reviews of major arguments. Second, debaters need to pay attention to the supporting material. The different kinds of evidence that a speaker offers, whether that evidence consists of examples, analogies, statistics, or other types of supporting information, are all things to which debaters and judges must listen carefully. Supporting evidence often calls for responses in refutation, and debaters who do not listen carefully during a round will miss opportunities to advance their cases. Finally, synthesizing information involves getting a clear picture of the major arguments in addition to understanding some of the specific materials used to support the arguments.

Regardless of the method used to flow the debate, every debater needs some method for tracking each individual speaker’s contributions to the debate. In addition, debaters need to accurately track the contributions of the different teams and sides.

One technique that some debaters and judges employ is to use different colored pens for government and opposition arguments. For instance, a blue pen could be used to note all the government arguments and a red pen could be used to track all the opposition arguments.

Another common technique for distinguishing the arguments presented by both sides is the use of numbers to track the government arguments and letters to track the opposition arguments. For instance, using the “numbers and letters” approach, as the debate progresses, each new argument presented by the government team gets a new number and each new argument by the opposition gets a new letter. When a number appears on the flow in a space for an opposition speaker that number means that the speaker was engaging in some refutation of that specific government argument. In whip speeches, where no new arguments are allowed but points of crystallization and summary are expected, a different symbol such as a star can be used to track the crystallization and summary points (with the numbers and letters still in use to note specific arguments the whip speaker discussed in his or her summary). See Appendix A for a sample flow sheet using this particular approach.

Debaters should try to use the most efficient means of notation possible when flowing the arguments. For instance, if an opponent is making an argument about “economic loss,” a brief way to make note of this point on a flow sheet might be to write “econ” and follow this with a downward arrow to symbolize the “loss” part. Arrows are good shorthand symbols that can be easily used as substitutes for terms like “loss” and “increase,” and other symbols might also provide a means for making the process of flowing more efficient. As long as the debater or judge is able to clearly interpret the meaning of their symbols at a later time, any types of personal shorthand notation can and should be used to save time.
Finally, debaters must also be mindful of the importance of continued active listening. When flowing a debate, debaters may be tempted to stop listening closely when they start preparing their own speeches or note a response to a point made by their opponent. Debaters certainly do need to note their responses to information in order to provide clear refutation in both their own speeches and points of information. However, while the formulation of such responses is a fundamental debate skill, debaters must also learn to continue active listening throughout the debate. With sufficient practice, debaters can keep at least some level of focus on the listening process so that they do not miss key statements and pieces of evidence mentioned by the other speakers in the round.

Summary

In this chapter, listening is defined and presented as a key communication skill in debate. Debaters need good critical listening skills because the refutation on both sides of an argument requires good listening skills by all participants in the round. Listening is also an important skill for judges and audience members. Most of the concepts related to listening from this chapter are highly applicable to training judges and preparing them to evaluate debates. Overall, argumentation requires careful listening, good skills in paraphrasing, an ability to synthesize important information, and skills in note-taking. Through practice and an application of some of the principles discussed in this chapter, skills in listening can be developed and enhanced.
Terms and Concepts From Chapter 13

- Hearing
- Listening
- Active listening
- Paraphrasing
- Simple paraphrase
- Flowing

Discussion Questions For Chapter 13

- What are some of the common misconceptions about listening?
- What specific steps can a debater take to improve his/her listening skills?
- What is a paraphrase? Why is paraphrasing an important part of refutation?
- How can flowing help to improve the arguments presented in a debate round?
- Why should debaters try to use efficient methods of notation when flowing a round of debate? What are some specific examples of these efficient methods of notation?
Exercise For Chapter 13

Directions – This activity focuses on generating basic arguments, actively listening to arguments, and paraphrasing. First, divide the participants into smaller groups of 12-15 and have the members of the group stand and form a circle. Announce one of the topics (see list below), and start the activity by first going clockwise around the circle (counterclockwise can be used for later rounds). The first participant has to “agree” with the statement and give a reason why. The next participant has to paraphrase the statement by the first participant and then “disagree” with the statement and give a reason why. The third participant has to paraphrase the statement by second participant and then “agree” with the statement and give a new reason why. This order continues (participants will paraphrase the statement by the person who immediately preceeded them and then provide their own unique statement) until everyone in the circle has had a chance to participate, and those who are later in the circle should come up with new reasons to “agree” or “disagree.” Facilitators should start in a new position in the circle with each new topic to ensure that everyone in the group has the challenge of coming up with a new reason later in the round. In later rounds, the activity can also be changed to focus more on “refutation” (where the first speaker has to agree, and the second speaker has to specifically refute the first speaker’s reason for agreeing).

9 resolutions (for the activity)

1) Rice is better than noodles.
2) Technology ruins personal relationships.
3) Family is everything.
4) Meat is better than vegetables.
5) Old age is the best time in a person’s life.
6) Cold weather is better than hot weather.
7) Money creates happiness.
8) The Internet is a better source of information than books.
9) Bicycles are better than cars.
Appendix A – SAMPLE DEBATE FLOW SHEET

**Worlds-Style Debate Flow Sheet**

Create a grid with two columns and four rows

Use the space in each individual box to take relevant notes about the MODEL (M) and each argument

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Use **NUMBERS** for each new **Government** argument and **LETTERS** for each new **Opposition** argument