

How to be a bad listener

(taken from [The Listening Life](#) by Adam S. McHugh, pp139-142)

If desire is a key to good listening, the root of bad listening is not flawed technique but a lack of motivation. Motivation will cover any number of listening transgressions. At the same time, it will lead a person to hone his listening approach and to identify bad listening patterns in himself. Let's be honest: there is some bad listening going on out there. The bigger problem may be that it's masquerading as good listening. Some people believe they are good listeners when they are not, and other people sometimes wrongly label others as good listeners.

Here are a few of the usual suspects in the ongoing case of bad listening.

- **The one-up.** "You think that's something? Let me tell you about what happened to me last week!" Here the listener sits quietly through the other person's story only to try to trump them with a better, more interesting story. It's a competition more than a conversation.
- **The sleight of hand.** "Uh huh, that's great. But what I really want to talk to you about is..." Listening lulls the speaker into a false sense of security so that they don't see the trick coming, namely, what the speaker's agenda is for the conversation.
- **The inspector.** "Didn't you say last week that..." The listener asks a series of questions, usually closed-ended questions, in a way that feels like a detective questioning a suspect, trying to lure him into a confession. Listening is the lightning before the thunder, the burning fuse before the boom.
- **The reroute.** "That reminds me of..." The listener takes the topic the speaker has addressed and rolls it over, however clumsily, into the topic she wants to talk about or the story she wants to tell. Nothing will stop her from talking about what she came to talk about.
- **The projector.** "I'm totally dealing with the same thing!" The listener projects his problems onto the speaker, and then projects his solutions onto the speaker's problems. The project sees himself in every conversation.
- **The interrogation.** "What do you think about...? What is your favorite...? Why are you moving to...?" The listener gets wind of the idea that listening is about asking questions, which is good, but then peppers the speaker with them like a game of dodgeball, which is bad. Here we learn that questions, as helpful as they can be, can also be very controlling, and that they can be vehicles for the question's agenda.
- **The password.** "Cheese. I had the best cheese at a dinner party with the mayor last week!" The listener sits quietly through the speaker's conversation, but then seizes on one word that she uses, amid a sea of paragraphs, and treats it as a password that unlocks a whole new conversation. The original context has no bearing on where the password takes you. It sounds funny, but it happens more than you might think. The password sentence usually starts with "Speaking of..."
- **The hijack.** You have to give the listener credit with this one: at least he's honest and doesn't even pretend to use what the speaker said as a stepping stone. He refrains from speech while the other person talks and then just starts talking about whatever is on his mind, as though they are two deaf ships passing in the night. I'm reminded

of a quote I heard once that says most people do not dialogue; they perform a monologue in the presence of another person.

- **The mechanic.** “Here is what you need to do.” This person listens like a mechanic listens to a sputtering engine, trying to diagnose the problem so she can fix it. Contrary to popular cultural thinking, both men *and* women are guilty of this one.
- **The bone of contention.** “I disagree with that!” There are an unfortunate number of listeners who listen specifically for what they disagree with. Ask a pastor what people talk to him about after a sermon if you don’t believe me. Even if they agree with 99 percent of what a person says, they will pounce on the 1 percent they don’t agree with, and in doing so they ignore what is significant to the speaker.
- **The deflector.** “Yeah, but you...” This one is a refuge for people who have a hard time receiving criticism, which, let’s be honest, is all of us. Someone offers us feedback, so we quickly return the favor without taking the time to absorb what he said.
- **The boomerang question.** “Did you have a good weekend? Because I...” Here a person asks a question of another person with the true intention of answering it herself. The question goes out and then boomerangs back. If you know the answer to your own question, you probably shouldn’t ask it. Sometimes when I get a boomerang question, I’ll respond, “Why don’t you just tell me how *your* weekend went?” That usually gets my message across.

The culprits in these bad listening capers would say that their intentions are good. They would say that they sat quietly and let the other person talk before chiming in and therefore they listened successfully. The problem is that silence and listening are *not* the same thing. Listening is not what you do when you don’t know what to say. If you are using your silence to dwell on what is happening internally—to listen to your own inner monologue, to come up with more questions, to form a critique or rebuttal, to prepare your own story or to otherwise focus less on what the other person is communicating and more on your thoughts about what the other person is communicating—then you are not listening well. True listening is an internal matter; only the listener can truly know in a given moment whether they are listening. You can easily play the part of listening without becoming a listener.

The second, and more prominent, problem is that when you have finished refraining from speech, you immediately turn the conversation toward yourself. Your response, story, disagreement, closed-ended question or agenda is, in reality, about you. The quiet you offered, as a result, has the feel of a setup, as though you were simply biding your time until it was your turn to speak. If you are “listening” in such a way that the speaker must make an abrupt shift to listen, you are not doing it right.