

HOW TO SPEAK HOW TO LISTEN

Mortimer J. Adler



Author of How to Read a Book

MACMILLAN PUBLISHING CO., INC.
NEW YORK

COLLIER MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS.
LONDON

1983

ing have been replaced by instruction in English. It is the so-called English teacher who gives elementary instruction in reading and elementary and more advanced instruction in composition. Unfortunately, the latter usually lays much more stress on what is called "creative writing" than it does on writing that tries to convey thought—ideas, knowledge, or understanding. Some students receive instruction in public speaking, but this falls far short of training in all the skills required for effective speech. None, as I have said before, receives any instruction in listening.

• 3 •

Those who complain about the low level of skill in writing and reading that is now attained by most graduates of our schools and colleges make the mistake of assuming that if these deficiencies were remedied, all would be well. They assume that, if a person has learned to write well and read well, he* will of course know how to speak well and listen well. That is simply not the case.

The reason why is that speaking and listening differ in remarkable ways from writing and reading. Their difference makes it much more difficult to acquire the requisite skills. Let me explain.

On the surface, it would appear that speaking and listening perfectly parallel writing and reading. Both pairs involve uses of language whereby one mind reaches out to another and that other responds. If one can do this well

*The reader should be advised that when I use the word "man" or the masculine pronouns "he" or "him," I am referring to all human beings, both male and female, not just males. I do not always use "he" and "him" instead of "he and she" or "him and her," my choice of which to use in a given sentence being determined solely by stylistic considerations.

by means of the written word, why should there be any more difficulty in doing it well by means of the spoken word? If one can respond well to the written word, why cannot one respond as well to the spoken word?

The fluidity and fluency of oral discourse is the reason why that is not so. One is always able to go back over what one has read, read it again, and make a better job of it. One can improve one's reading endlessly, by reading something over and over again. I have done this in my own reading of the great books.

In writing, one is always able to revise and improve what one has written. No writer need pass on a piece of writing to someone else until he or she is satisfied that it is written as well as possible. That, too, has been part of my own experience in writing books or anything else.

In the case of both reading and writing, the essential element in the requisite skill consists in knowing how to improve one's reading or writing. That essential element plays no part in the skill to be attained in speaking and listening, because speaking and listening are transient and fleeting like performing arts, as writing and reading are not. The latter are more like painting and sculpture, the products of which have permanence.

Consider such performing arts as acting, ballet dancing, playing a musical instrument, or conducting an orchestra. In all of these, a given performance, once it is given, cannot be improved. The artist may be able to improve *on* it in a later performance, but during the time he or she is on stage, that one performance should be as good as it can be made. When the curtain goes down it is finished—unamendable.

The situation is exactly the same in speaking and listening. One cannot go back over what one is saying orally

and improve it, as one can go back over what one has written and improve it. Unlike writing, ongoing speech is generally unamendable. Any effort to take back what one has said while one is speaking often turns out to be more confusing than letting the deficiencies stand.

A prepared speech is, of course, amendable before being delivered, as a piece of writing is. An impromptu or improvised speech is not.

One may be able to do a better job of speaking at some later time, but on a particular occasion, whatever excellence one is able to achieve must be achieved right then and there. Similarly, there is no way of improving one's listening on a given occasion. It has to be as good as it can be right then and there.

A writer can at least hope that readers will take as much time as may be necessary to understand the written message, but the speaker cannot cherish any such hope. He or she must contrive what is to be said in such a way that it is as understandable as possible the first time around. The time span of speaking and listening coincide. Both begin and end together. Not so the time spans of writing and reading.

• 4 •

All of these differences between reading and writing, on the one hand, and listening and speaking, on the other, may be the reason why I did not immediately follow up *How to Read a Book* with a companion volume on how to listen. I have put off that much harder task for more than forty years, but I think I should do so no longer, because I have become so aware of the almost universal defects in listening that are manifested on all sides.

It is possible to set forth the rules and directions for reading well without including rules and directions for writing well. That is what I did in *How to Read a Book*, and it was justified by the fact that I was then mainly concerned with reading the very best books, which are, of course, all well written.

When we turn from written to oral discourse, we are confronted with a different state of affairs. One can deal with writing and reading separately; in fact, that is the way they are dealt with in our schools. That is not possible in the case of speaking and listening, if for no other reason than the fact that the most important kind of speaking and listening occurs in talk or conversation, which is a two-way affair that involves us as both speakers and listeners.

It is possible to deal with uninterrupted speech by itself. Skill in that performance can be acquired without skill in listening. So, too, is it possible to deal with silent listening by itself. Skill in that performance can be acquired without skill in speaking. But it is impossible to acquire skill in conversation—in talk or discussion—without learning how to speak and how to listen well.