

**TEACHING THE  
CORE SKILLS OF  
LISTENING &  
SPEAKING**

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To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations—as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner. Being productive members of these conversations requires that students contribute accurate, relevant information; respond to and develop what others have said; make comparisons and contrasts; and analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in various domains. (p. 22)

Why “presentation of knowledge and ideas”?

New technologies have broadened and expanded the role that speaking and listening play in acquiring and sharing knowledge and have tightened their link to other forms of communication. The Internet has accelerated the speed at which connections between speaking, listening, reading, and writing can be made, requiring that students be ready to use these modalities nearly simultaneously. (p. 48)

These statements are obviously true. What is less obvious is that students don’t develop these skills without direct instruction. To guide that instruction, each anchor standard has a grade-level version (one each in grades K–8, then one for grades 9–10 and one for grades 11–12). The grade-level versions become increasingly complex as students get older, and when we look at all the grade-level versions of a standard together, we can trace, step by step, how students are expected to progress. The foundational skills they acquire in the early grades will be applied and expanded in later grades until they reach the proficiency level described in the anchor standard. We’ll look at the progressions of all the Common Core’s speaking and listening standards in the chapters to come. Flip ahead for a preview, or go to [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org).

The Common Core requires teachers to redefine the words “listening” and “speaking” and to embrace rigor. It’s no longer enough to rely on students’ reassurance that, yes, they heard what we said in the lecture, what their classmate said in a discussion, or what the expert in the online video said; now we must teach students to *evaluate* what they heard and how it was presented. Similarly, nearly all teachers have students give presentations and have done so forever, but now we are called on to spend time teaching students to

As an example, I recall a faculty meeting called one Friday afternoon so that someone from the district office could introduce us to RTI. At 4:30, after an exhausting week of teaching, the trainer came in with a PowerPoint presentation full of densely packed text. Most of the teachers walked into the meeting feeling at least a little resentful of the scheduling. An hour and a half later, almost everyone walked out with a very negative impression of RTI, not because of anything having to do with RTI itself but because the presentation's timing and design were so poor. Our attitude colored our perception of the message.

Ask students to think about the filters they have. Work with a simple statement such as "Making a lot of money is good." Why might an American hear that phrase differently than a Buddhist monk in Tibet? Would it have something to do with how Americans have been raised with rags-to-riches stories and media models that glorify financial success, while the monk has come to eschew personal possessions? As soon as the American and the Tibetan Buddhist monk hear "Making a lot of money is good," who they are and what they believe instantly and inevitably colors their listening experience. It isn't even necessary to use such a dramatic example. Someone majoring in business will listen with a different bias than someone majoring in social work. Those biases can cause us to tune out parts of the messages we get. Only by being aware of these biases can we become more open and effective listeners.

#### **Ask students to paraphrase during discussion (4–12)**

Attention is a key to effective listening. Too often, students in a discussion group spend too little time listening and too much time waiting to speak. Something a speaker says triggers a thought, the hand goes up, and the ears shut out further input. Even though I ban raising a hand until a speaker has finished, I realize that it's natural for a listener's thoughts to focus less on "What other interesting things are being said?" and more on "Are you done yet so that I can add what I think?" One way to defeat this mindset and get students to really listen is to require them to paraphrase the last comment offered before adding a comment of their own.

I recall a day that one of my 6th grade students came running into class shouting, “We are all going to die! They are going to poison our air!” As it turned out, while doing online research for her project on air pollution, she came across a site that called itself the National Center for Atmospheric Study. It had a very impressive and official-seeming seal that looked “governmental.” According to the site, enemies of the United States had stockpiled poisonous gases and were going to release them into our air. Our only hope of survival would be to have tanks of oxygen available for all family members for the rest of their lives. I realized then that I should have taught my 6th graders more about the Internet before I sent them off researching, beginning with the warning that they should expect to find claims that are not true.

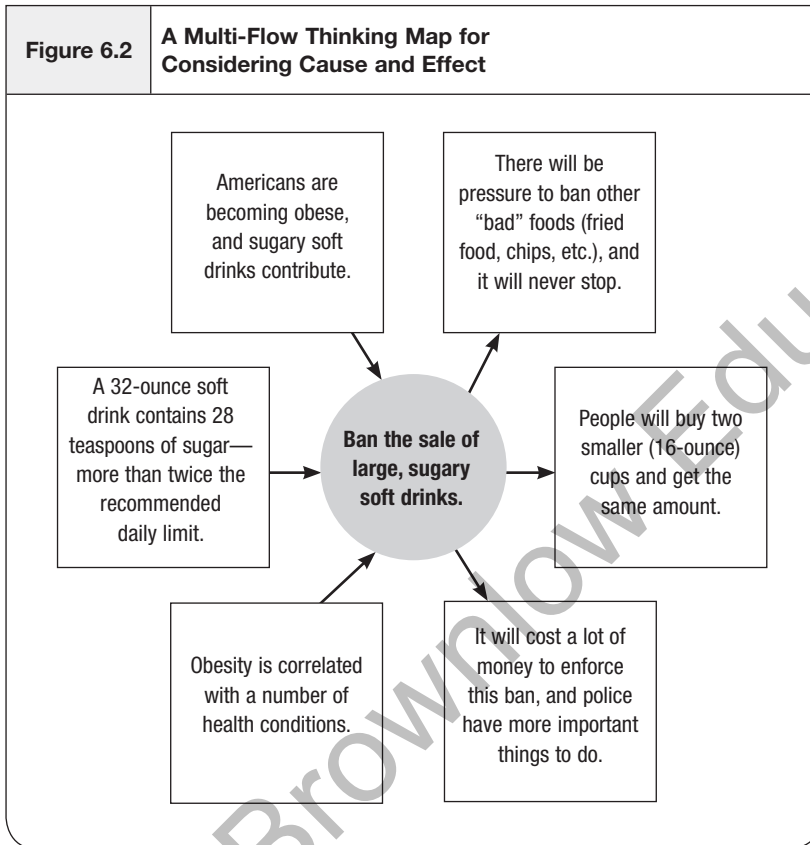
Today’s teacher must help students evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and motives of information presented in diverse media. This includes the Internet, as well as all the other information sources they encounter on a daily basis.

### ➔ TAKE ACTION: Developing Media Literacy

The previous “Take Action” section in this chapter focused on what I called “traditional” listening. Now I want to cover strategies for helping students become proficient “digital” listeners. Auditory messages are now intertwined with and affected by sound and image. We have to teach students how sounds and images affect listening and give them ways to evaluate that impact.

#### Teach visual literacy (4–12)

What we hear is affected by what we see. In the lower grades, it’s possible to make this point by simply asking if the image matches the message. For example, “About Me” speeches are a common assignment for young students. A child describing how much she loves soccer undercuts her message if she shows a picture of herself eating birthday cake; she reinforces her message if she shows a picture of herself in uniform and in action at a soccer game. Her audience will have an indelible impression of her soccer mania.



## Understanding Delivery

As noted, when it comes to good speaking, building a message is only part of the battle. When we give a *speaking* assignment, we ought to give a lot of weight to performance, or how well students do the actual speaking.

I am wary of oral presentation rubrics that focus too much on message construction and too little on message delivery. For example, a rubric may offer 10 points for including main ideas, 10 points for presence of supporting details, 10 points for use of citations, 10 points for organization, and 10 points for delivery. A student who constructed the speech well could easily get 80 percent of the possible points; if she can mumble the words and pick up just a couple

## Assessing Listening

You may already have experience with one of the consortium-designed tests. In addition to the logistical issues is a more fundamental issue: *How do we evaluate the core skills?* If you have a recorded verbal response, how do you score it? How do you know your students are making progress, and what does success look like? Remember, I once thought my students were listening when they were still and quiet. A rubric based on my criteria would have been pretty unacceptable. Let's look at some ways to get a better picture of listening.

Yes, the rubrics used by SBAC and PARCC can provide a helpful starting place, but the easy availability of listening skill rubrics aligned with Common Core's Speaking and Listening standards doesn't mean we have to limit our evaluation to simply what's articulated in the standards for our grade level. We can ask for more. For example, Standard 2 implies that students should only be able to listen for information. Frankly, we will bore our students to death if we limit their listening to just informative texts. We can ask our students to listen to fiction and design listening rubrics for fiction, addressing skills like the ability to follow a story and the ability to analyze the motivation of characters in that story. We can have high expectations for listening comprehension even when enjoyment is the main focus.

### ➤ TAKE ACTION: Evaluating Listening

The goal of these activities is to help students (and teachers) understand expectations for skillful listening. Whereas my students might have said, "I *am* listening. I wasn't moving, and I didn't say a word!" activities that were more focused would have helped them (and me) realize better objectives. These activities are consistent with one of the main goals of this book—teaching these skills in a purposeful and specific way.