It is easy to think your job as an audience member is to sit back, relax, and take life easy while a speaker addresses you. However, this view of the audience’s role is far from what it should be. As an audience member, you should be engaged and attentive. Below are a few things to keep in mind the next time you find yourself as a member of an audience.

1. Hearing vs. Listening: Have you ever heard the saying, “That went in one ear and out the other”? This is a good example of the difference between hearing and listening. We often hear things, but we actively listen to them much less often. Consider the definitions of each:
   - Hearing is the physiological process of decoding sounds.
   - Listening is the complex process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages.

Most of us have experienced what it feels like when people do not listen to us; this is not a positive feeling. Since most speakers put a great deal of time and effort into their presentations, audience members should be respectful listeners and participate by listening carefully to what the speaker has to say.

2. Avoid Unnecessary Criticism: Part of your job as an audience member is to evaluate, on some level, the speaker’s message. You might criticize the facts, figures, logic, or general arguments used in the speech in order to decide if you think the message is believable or if you should take action. However, you should do your best to avoid criticizing the speaker’s personal traits (appearance, dress, voice, etc.) as you make a decision about the message. Consider how unnecessary criticism might apply to the following example.
   - Stephen Hawking is a prize-winning physicist at Cambridge University. Because of a disability, he is confined to a wheelchair and can only speak with the aid of computer-synthesized sounds. He is unquestionably brilliant, but if an audience was focused on his appearance or unusual voice, they would miss his ingenious message.

Can you imagine the valuable information that would be lost if an audience member discounted Dr. Hawking’s knowledge simply because of his voice and appearance? Remember to focus on and judge the message—not the speaker.

3. Be a Receptive Audience Member: There is no doubt that you will disagree with many speakers’ messages. You may disagree with part or all of what they have to say. Even if you feel as though you have nothing in common with the speaker and that there is no way you would ever see things their way, keep an open mind and receive their message.
Benefits of being receptive include:

- Gaining a better understanding of other viewpoints
- Becoming a more informed citizen
- Being better prepared to refute arguments in the future
- Better understanding of your own positions and why you hold them

4. Be Sympathetic to a Speaker’s Anxiety: Presentation anxiety is a normal part of life for most speakers. Chances are, if you have ever given a speech you have felt anxiety on some level and seen it present itself by way of one or more symptoms. Anxiety affects some speakers in worse ways than others. As an audience member, how would you react if you saw a speaker affected in the following ways:

- Nervous to the point of being unable to continue talking?
- Nervous to the point of not making sense and sounding foolish?
- Nervous to the point of visibly trembling or shaking?

If you watch enough speeches you will most likely see at least one of these serious symptoms play out. As an audience member, it is important that you control your reaction to seeing these symptoms displayed. For example, if a speaker becomes nervous and is unable to continue speaking for a few moments, hearing laughter from the audience is likely to increase his or her level of anxiety and make things worse. Additionally, be sure to monitor your nonverbal feedback. Making eye contact, smiling, leaning forward, and nodding are all positive nonverbal behaviors.

5. Be Respectful: Speakers have spent a lot of time writing and practicing their speech, so you should treat them with respect during their presentation. As a general rule, if you wouldn’t do it meeting a romantic partner’s parents, you should not do it when someone else is speaking. Consider the following as an audience member:

- Smile encouragingly, nod your head, laugh when appropriate, give responses if/when asked
- Absolutely do not: text, get up and leave (except in an emergency), be on your laptop, interrupt, etc.

As an audience member you can help a speaker with their speech by being an attentive, sympathetic audience member. You can also harm a speakers’ speech by not paying attention and not giving feedback. Remember to follow the “golden rule” of being an audience member—do, as an audience member, what you want your audience to do.