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How to Listen to a Podcast for Class

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Welcome to a college history class! You've probably learned strategies for [reading books < http://wcaleb.org/blog/how-to-read>](http://wcaleb.org/blog/how-to-read), articles, even blog posts (maybe). But in this class you're going to listen to podcasts as a way to learn. So how do you do it?

Before we begin, there are some things you need to know.





Podcasts are not books

Podcasts are like books in a few important ways.

1. Podcasts come in all shapes, sizes, and formats. No two podcasts are exactly alike in their form, just like no two books are written exactly the same way. Some podcasts are more like magazines, with lots of smaller segments that may or may not be related to each other. Others are more like monographs, where the whole podcast is one person talking about one thing. Both of these formats can be valuable, but they require different ways of listening.
2. Some podcasts are boring. Just like some books are boring.

Podcasts are NOT like books in a few important ways.

1. You can't skip around in a podcast. You can't flip to the index and then return back to the place you were. Now, this is mostly an important thing for podcasters to know—they need to do a good job of explaining themselves. But if they don't, you'll need a strategy for figuring things out before you get lost as the audio keeps barreling along.
2. It's hard to include references in the body of a podcast. There are no footnotes in audio. Again, this is mostly something you should note if you're *making* a podcast. But it's important for you to know as you listen, too. How is the podcast citing its sources, or is it citing them at all?

How to listen to podcasts

Just like reading books, there are several steps to actively listening to a podcast.

Before you begin

1. Read the show notes (if they exist). This is kind of like reading the book jacket. Get a sense of what you're going to be hearing. Try to figure out the premise of the whole podcast series, as well as the specific episode you're listening to.
2. Look at how long the episode is. Is this something you're going to be able to listen to all at one go? Do you need to plan for a few sessions to get through it all? There is absolutely no rule that says you have to listen to a podcast in its entirety in one sitting. Take breaks if you need them!
3. Find out whether your podcast has a transcript. If it does, that makes your job a lot easier. If not, then you'll need to be a much more active listener.
4. Get yourself some things to take notes on. You don't need to take extensive notes, but you can't write in the margins of a podcast, so you'll need a pencil and paper or your computer.

While you're listening

These things don't necessarily occur in this order. You may find out some of these things at the outset, but you may also have to keep listening for the whole episode.

1. Take notes on who's talking. Is it one person (who are they? what is their deal?)? Are they talking to other people?
2. If they're talking to other people, why? What do the other

people bring to the conversation? (This question is kind of like reading the footnotes.)

3. Ask yourself: What is the thesis of the show? Why does this episode exist?
4. As you listen, write down the key points of the narrative. How is the show proving its case?
5. If you hear a word or phrase you're not familiar with, **pause the show**, write down the word, and look it up.
6. If you're having a hard time following the story because you feel like you don't have enough information, keep going for a few minutes—maybe they'll explain more. If you're still confused, **pause the show** and go do a little bit of background research. You probably don't need to do more than ten or fifteen minutes of research on Wikipedia to get yourself up to speed. Then come back, back up the show to get yourself into the story again, and forge ahead.
7. If something is confusing or unclear, but not enough for you to stop the show, write down your question. That question is a great thing to include in your listening response.

When the show is over

You're not QUITE done when the show is over. Now it's time to think about what you've heard.

1. Ask yourself, did the show make its point? Was its thesis proved?
2. Ask yourself, what was missing from this story? Are there things that still don't add up or don't make sense? Whose perspective was prioritized?
3. Think about what specific parts of the show you remember. Why do you think those parts stick in your mind?

4. Write (or record) your response. How can you connect what you heard to other parts of the course, or other parts of our world?

When to listen to a podcast

We all know that podcasts are great for listening to while driving in the car, cooking dinner, or running on the treadmill. If you like podcasts, you probably like them for the stories, the humor, the narrative.

Can you listen to a podcast for class while on the treadmill? Absolutely. You don't necessarily need to have 100% of your attention on the podcast at all times. The podcasts that are best for listening to while doing other things are the ones that have great stories that you remember.

How do you know whether you've got a good podcast for distracted listening? Well, you don't, until you start. Here's a good rule: If you find that you've missed at least 30 seconds to a minute of the podcast because you zoned out, then right now isn't the time to listen to it. Stop the podcast and listen to it another time.

If you're missing chunks of the podcast because of interruptions, now might also not be the time to listen. BUT you can also just pause it while your kid asks for his hundredth snack of the day, or while you clean up the dog vomit in the corner, or while you throw your mask on when you see other people coming toward you on your run. Then resume once the crisis has passed.

If you can't take notes while you're listening, make sure you jot down some notes as soon as you can. And sometimes you might need to take another pass at a podcast that you listened to with distractions. Just like there's nothing preventing you from reading

a book multiple times, there's no law that says you can't listen to a podcast more than one time.

For this class, hopefully I've made podcasts that are interesting, and I've assigned other podcasts that are interesting. But you might not be that interested in some of them. That's ok. All I ask is that you give them a listening ear for at least one full listen.

So that's it! Enjoy! People have been learning with their ears since before there was writing, so by learning how to listen actively, you'll be joining good company that spans the globe and the history of humanity.

Tell me in the comments the strategies you have for active listening to podcasts and other audio forms!

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