

# An Auditory Transition

**Barbara Gastel**

“How do you spell \_\_\_\_\_?” a college friend of mine asked his roommate.

“It’s spelled \_\_\_\_\_!” I (the future editor) yelled back from several doors away.

The classmate marveled that I had heard him—and perhaps wondered what else I had overheard. Indeed, as an undergraduate with acute hearing, I overheard more than I probably should have. A few years later, when I chided a fellow medical student for mumbling, he claimed I had poor hearing. However, at a health screening soon after, I learned that my hearing was exceptionally good.

As I embarked on decades of university teaching, keen hearing continued to serve me. I could easily understand the most soft-spoken students. Also usefully, I could discern murmured conversations in the back of the classroom.

Recently, though, more students seemed to mumble. I attributed the change to the masks being worn in the COVID pandemic. But when the masks came off, these students’ enunciation still seemed lacking. More meeting rooms seemed to have poor acoustics—which I ascribed to ventilation systems enhanced to hinder virus transmission. I found myself mishearing words; in a noisy restaurant, a colleague’s mention of a topless bar turned out to be of a tapas bar. I could no longer hear my old radio clearly. And when I replaced the radio, little improvement ensued. Maybe I, rather than the radio, was having the problem.

Perhaps, I thought, I was now experiencing just average hearing. To document my current baseline, I saw an audiologist. He found that, in fact, I had a mild to moderate hearing loss. Genetics had finally caught up to me. Maybe my initial excellent hearing had delayed its impact.

The audiologist prescribed hearing aids. In function and appearance, this technology has greatly improved since my grandmother and then my father endured hearing loss. The devices are barely more conspicuous than earbuds. They are rechargeable. They help me understand the mumblers and enjoy the chirping birds. They aren’t, however, as effective as eyeglasses, which fully correct my vision. I still have difficulty understanding some voices. Clattering dishes now sound painfully brash. If you sneeze loudly near me, you can almost scrape me off the ceiling.

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Technology is just one part of coping with diminished hearing. I proceeded to read a little about lipreading—or, more broadly, speechreading. I learned that this practice can include inferring meaning from context and guessing what is intended when a word seems incorrect. These thought processes are some I use in editing. Perhaps their use delayed my recognizing my hearing loss.

Out of curiosity, I sought information on careers suited for the hard of hearing. In a quick search, *writer* and *proofreader* repeatedly surfaced. Sometimes, *professor* appeared. I did not see *editor* listed, though it seems suitable for reasons similar to writer and proofreader. Given one of my hobbies, I was pleased to see *pastry chef* near the top of one list.

I also read about contending more generally with trouble hearing. Some advice was obvious—such as having people look at you when they speak. I did, however, gain new tips. I learned that in restaurants—where the background noise can especially hamper hearing—it’s best to be seated in a corner or next to a wall. The reading also advocated being upfront about hearing loss rather than bluffing about understanding. (Hence, in part, this essay.)

Fortunately, my hearing loss tends to hinder communication only during the audiological equivalent of stress tests. In quiet, well-lit environments with people facing me from nearby, I usually can understand well, even without hearing aids. I also can comprehend easily on the telephone. Zoom meetings—which let me see speakers’ faces—are a boon, and I rarely use the captions (which, distractingly, I proofread and edit). My audiologist says my hearing is likely to remain essentially stable for many years.

Much as suiting environments for wheelchair users helps others too, providing an auditorily friendly milieu can benefit many. My students—especially those who are nonnative English speakers or themselves have poor hearing—appreciate efforts to have everyone speak clearly and project well. Also, my hearing loss prompted me to improve the videoconferencing system in my classroom. The students (especially those attending remotely) welcome the better audio, and so do colleagues using the room.

My transition from superb to subnormal hearing has taken some adjustment. But as someone who likes experiencing new situations and solving problems, I have found the adjustment stimulating in ways. I now have more empathy with—and, I think, communicate better with—people with such difficulties. I feel fortunate that my professions place only limited demands on hearing. I know I’m privileged to be able to afford good assistive technologies. And I hope that sharing my experience will benefit, or at least interest, others.