

Why Listen?

Using Audiobooks to Support Literacy

By Rose Brock, Ph.D.



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Why is listening so important? Listening plays a vital role in communication; in fact, it is the first language skill to be acquired.¹ It is a highly complex, interactive process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind. The U.S. Department of Labor identified basic mathematics, reading, writing, speaking, and listening as essential skills for high school graduates to function effectively in the workplace; and life in general.

DID YOU KNOW?

- **85% of learning derives from listening.**²
- **30% of people are auditory learners.**³

For many readers, experiencing a well-told story is satisfying on many levels. Traditional reading of print can be both difficult and unsatisfying, for some readers. Audiobooks provide a favorable option while promoting literacy by focusing on the art of listening. As librarians Sharon Grover and Liz Hannegan state, "Current audiobook productions—with their high production values, stellar narrators, and wide variety of formats—can be one avenue to reach these reluctant or struggling readers, as well as their proficient peers who are looking for more time to include reading in their busy schedules"⁴.

Sharon Grover and Liz Hannegan discuss the Link between Audiobooks and Common Core

Astute teachers and librarians have been integrating audiobooks into their lesson plans for many years. With the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers, librarians, and parents are wondering if audiobooks can be seamlessly incorporated into lesson plans with these new standards? The answer is an emphatic **YES!**

Three relateable aspects of the CCSS are:

1. Students must meet Common Core State Standards not only for reading and writing, but also for speaking, listening, and language. This means the CCSS address specific skills that we know are improved by listening to audiobooks.
2. The CCSS do not replace subject content standards. Students must still learn history, social studies, science, and technology. Therefore, students can continue to supplement their reading in these content areas with audiobooks. Reading with your ears is just as valid with the CCSS as it was before these standards were introduced.
3. Under CCSS students are asked to interpret information presented in diverse formats, which includes listening to an audiobook, reading text, watching a movie or live performance.

The shared experience of listening to literature promotes discussion and critical thinking skills and that is really what the CCSS are all about.



Audiobooks Provide a Medium for Developing Listening and Literacy Skills in the Following Ways:

- Listening skills help with processing auditory information and expand attention spans⁵
- Motivate, keep listeners interest, and win over reluctant readers
- Encourage an appreciation of fluency of oral reading (including “harder” classics)
- Expose listeners to a variety of genres; meeting individual interests
- Develop understanding of correct pronunciation of English, dialects, and non-English words
- Provide a good reading role model and a level playing field for a wide range of learners and abilities
- Practice using simple technology
- Create a personal connection and a sense of intimacy
- Encourage higher level critical thinking, interpretation, and imagination

While examining how audiobooks support literacy it's worth considering the connection between listening and reading. Both listening and reading share analogous features (both are language based); the vocabulary basis for both listening and reading is oral. They include common skills and processes (noting details, making inferences, etc.), and both listening and reading require the construction of meaning. As Lundsteen offers,

“ If a student cannot comprehend a message through listening, it is unlikely that she will comprehend that message through reading. ”

Given the proven power of audiobooks and their role in the larger literacy landscape, it is critical that librarians build a robust audiobook collection for their educators, learners, and families.

If You Build a Strong Collection, They Will Come and Listen!

There are a number of awards that specifically recognize the quality of audiobook productions:

- American Library Association's (ALA) Odyssey Award is given to the producer of the best audiobooks produced for children and/or young adults. ala.org/yalsa/odyssey
- ALA's Young Adult Library Services (YALSA) “Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults” ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks
- ALA's Association of Library Services for Children (ALSC) “Notable Children's Recordings” ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncr
- The Audio Publishers Association (APA) sponsors The Audie Awards (Audies) for outstanding audiobooks. audiopub.org/audies-gala.asp
- Capital Choices Audiobook List capitolchoices.org/all_lists

These audiobook awards are excellent tools for providing your collection development with an audiobook focus. Publications such as *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *AudioFile*, *The Horn Book*, and *Library Media Connection* also offer reviews of audiobook titles to help guide your purchases.

Once a Collection is in Place, It's Time to Sell It!

Marketing your audiobook collection to patrons is essential; create audiobook-focused displays, use a parent newsletter or email blasts to notify families of the audiobook resources available to them, and circulate your audiobooks to all of your patrons.

Summertime means road trips and audiobooks are the perfect companion for families; tuning in together offers families a shared platform for discussion. Promote shared family listening to parents by helping them recognize that listening to a good book together teaches children that reading, listening, and books are valuable.

¹ Wolvin, Andrew D. and G. Carolyn Coakley. 2000. “Listening Education in the 21st century.” *International Journal of Listening*. Vol. 14 pp. 143-152.

² Hoskisson, G. and K. Tompkins. 1991. *Language arts: Content and teaching strategies*. New York: McGraw Hill.

³ Carbo, Marie and Rita Dunn, and Kenneth Dunn. 1986. *Teaching Students to Read Through Their Individual Learning Styles*. Prentice-Hall. p. 13.

⁴ Grover, Sharon and Liz Hannegan. 2011. *Listening to Learn: Audiobooks Supporting Literacy*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. p. 1.

⁵ Wolfson, Gene. 2008. “Using Audiobooks to Meet the Needs of Adolescent Readers.” *American Secondary Education*. Vol. 36. 2: pp. 105-117.

⁶ Lundsteen, Sara W. 1998. *Language arts: A problem-solving approach*. New York: HarperCollins.