

Benefits of Learning to Speech-read

by Nan Asher

Yes, yes, I know... many of you have invested thousands of dollars in technology that is sitting in or behind your ears, and many of you have hundreds of dollars in assistive devices as well. Perhaps you only have a mild hearing loss and the audiologist says you aren't ready for hearing aids yet. So why on earth would you want a low-tech strategy such as speech-reading? Isn't this the age of technology? Isn't Hi-tech better than Lo-tech? Besides, isn't speech-reading too much like work?

The truth of the matter is that communication itself is work, and speech-reading is another technique that can greatly assist you. Many people speech-read to some extent and they are not necessarily aware of it. I know people who have told me they can't possibly comprehend anything by speech-reading and in the next breath they tell me that in order to hear, they must put on both their hearing aids and their glasses! Are you one of those folks?

Hearing aids do help you to hear, but only to a certain extent. In my case, speech recognition is 68% with hearing aids alone. Using speech-reading alone, I might get 35% (if I am having a good day... and everyone remembers to face me all the time... and the lighting is perfect... and if I am not tired). However, when using speech-reading along with my hearing aids, my speech comprehension leaps to an incredible 98%.

Let me explain by using an example. The highest frequency sounds are s, f, and th. Using hearing aids alone, I am virtually unable to distinguish between these sounds although I might be able to guess in the context of the sentence (provided I fully understand the rest of the sentence). However the above named sounds look very different on the lips, thus facilitating better understanding.

You can learn speech-reading by attending classes or even watching special tutorial videos. Daily practice is needed to hone these skills. Many people find practicing with a mirror helpful. However, it is best to work in a group setting so that you can practice on a variety of faces. Also, try speech-reading from different angles because some sounds are easier to understand from the side of the face.

Just like learning to read a book, speech-reading starts with a focus on phonics and the sounds that go with each letter. As you master certain skills, larger passages become easier to lip read and you are not focusing on any particular letter or word as you speech-read for comprehension.

Happy speech-reading!