

Bad listening habit No. 10 is the most important of all 10. I have saved it until last for that reason. It is a little tricky, and you will have to tune me in or you will miss it. It is wasting the differential between speech and thought speed. Now, on the average in America, we talk 125 words a minute conversationally. But put a man in front of an audience and ask him to talk informatively, and he slows down to 100 words a minute, right on the nose. How fast do people listen? Or, to put the question better: How many words a minute can people think as they listen, if all their thoughts were measurable in words per minute? Three kinds of research I have not time to give you in detail all point to the same conclusion: Easy cruising speed of thought is always at least 400 words a minute.

Now, the differential between 100 and 400 is a snare, a pitfall, and a delusion. It is a breeder of false security and a breeder of mental tangents. What actually happens is what has been happening to me for the past 45 minutes. You have been tuning me in, and in 10 seconds have been able to identify what I was up to, and you have felt free to rip out for a 50-second mental holiday, which you did. Then, because you invested some energy getting here this morning, you cagily checked me in again, in 10 seconds found out what I was up to now, and you ripped out for another 50-second holiday. You are in for 10, out for 50, in for 10, out for 50. Really, it is not so bad if you always come back for the 10. But, sooner or later, on one of these mental excursions of yours, you may hit upon a topic too engrossing to drop.

Now, at your age levels I am not certain just what that one would be. I think I know what it usually is in the mind of a typical male college student. He goes to his engineering class, and the old professor stumbles on, drawing a big mock-up along behind him, then turns and glowers at the group and says, "Well, you birds think you are going to make engineers. Some of you will, but I am still going to flunk a couple of you, and I think you know which two I am talking about. Be that as it may, if you make a success in this chosen career of yours, it is going to be possible only if you have learned one fundamental thing on this campus; and that is that the most precious item an engineer even owns, and the thing with which he must learn to eat, sleep, live, and die at his side, is his slide rule. Thus, this morning I have brought out my big slide rule and I am going to review with you all the mathematic computations possible with this instrument."