As Far As Your Brain Is Concerned, Audiobooks Are Not 'Cheating'

NEW YORK
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By Melissa Dahl

As is required of all women in their 30s, I am in a book club. At the first meeting of this group, one poor unsuspecting woman mentioned that she had listened to that month's selection instead of reading it. That, the rest of the group decided together, is definitely cheating. Never mind that no one could exactly articulate how or why it was cheating; it just felt like it was, and others would agree. She never substituted the audiobook for the print version again (or, if she did, she never again admitted it).

This question — whether or not listening to an audiobook is "cheating" — is one University of Virginia psychologist Daniel Willingham gets fairly often, especially ever since he published a book, in 2015, on the science of reading. (That one was about teaching children to read; he's got another book out next spring about adults and reading.) He is very tired of this question, and so, recently, he wrote a blog post addressing it. (His opening line: "I've been asked this question a lot and I hate it.") If, he argues, you take the question from the perspective of cognitive psychology — that is, the mental processes involved — there is no real difference between listening to a book and reading it. So, according to that understanding of the question: No, audiobooks are not cheating.

His reasoning reveals some fascinating insights about the way the brain makes sense of language, whether written or spoken. But first, consider what that assertion — that listening is cheating — is saying: It suggests that the listener got some reward without putting in the work. Because that does seem to be the typical argument, Willingham said. "It's not that you're missing out on something, or it's not that this experience could be better for you," he told Science of Us. "It's that you're cheating. And so they think you're getting the rewarding part of it … and it's the difficult part that you've somehow gotten out of." So that implies, Willingham argues, that to your brain, listening is less "work" than reading. And that is true, sort of — but it stops being true somewhere around the fifth grade.

There are two basic processes happening when you're reading: There is decoding, or translating the strings of letters into words that mean something. And then there is language processing, or comprehension — that is, figuring out the syntax, the story, et cetera. (It's obviously much more complicated than that; this is what's known as the "simple view" of reading, but it's sufficient for thinking about the question at hand.) Researchers have studied the question of comprehension for decades, and "what you find is very high correlations of reading comprehension and listening comprehension," Willingham said. As science writer Olga Khazan noted in 2011, a "1985 study found listening comprehension correlated strongly with reading comprehension — suggesting that those who read books well would listen to them well. In a 1977 study, college students who listened to a short story were able to summarize it with equal accuracy as those who read it." Listeners and readers retain about equal understanding of the passages they've consumed, in other words.

Decoding, by contrast, is specific to reading, Willingham said; this is indeed one more step your mind has to take when reading a print book as compared to listening to the audiobook version. But by about late elementary school, decoding becomes so second-nature that it isn't any additional "work" for your brain. It happens automatically.

According to the simple model of reading, then, you really can't consider listening to a book to be easier than reading it. But there are other differences here, of course, one being that it's really easy for your mind to begin to wander when you're listening to an audiobook. But is that more or less likely to happen as skimming the less interesting parts when you're reading? There's not exactly an easy way to test that question empirically, but there are some comparable things about the way people circle back to catch the stuff they missed, whether they're reading or listening. "About 10 to 20 percent of the eye

movements you make are actually regressions, where your eyes are moving backwards," Willingham explained. Many of those regressions happen when you thought you had the word, but — whoops, no, you didn't quite get it; others happen when you might be trying to work out syntax.

And something similar happens with the brain's auditory system, specifically a phenomenon called echoic memory. "I'm sure you've had the experience where someone says something, and you're not really listening, and then you can tell from their intonation that they've stopped talking and that they've asked you a question," Willingham said. "And you're like, 'Oh, shit, I totally was not listening to this person.' And then you say, 'I'm sorry, what?' And then in that moment where you say, 'I'm sorry, what?' — you're able to recover what it was they asked you." You did not listen. And yet you still heard, and there is a wisp of a memory of that, which is still banging around inside your mind. "And you are, in the time it takes you to say, 'I'm sorry, what?' — you are consulting that little memory store, and you get the last second or two of what they said," he continued. So that, he argues, is comparable to the visual system's eye regressions: In both mental processes, your mind ticks back to what it just consumed, in order to double check the meaning.

The TL;DR version of all of this is that as far as the mental processes are concerned, there really isn't much difference between reading and listening to a book. One is not more work than the other. And yet there is, maybe, something to the way your elementary-school teacher might've phrased the question — you're only cheating yourself. Returning for a moment to the simple model of reading: The decoding process does become automatic once you've passed a certain level of reading proficiency, but you can become even better at this well into adulthood — and the only way to get better is by reading. The improvements are small ("infinitesimal," as Willingham put it) but they are there, and up for the grabs for a reader. Comprehension, too, is something that improves the more you read. And there are also, of course, times when you need to remind yourself of something farther back in the text, something that is no longer held in that one- to two-second echoic memory. (Which Greyjoy is Victarion, again?) You could pause the audiobook and hit that 15-second rewind button until you find it. But you probably won't.

There's also this question to contend with: Are you consuming the text the way the author intended it? (And how much does that matter?) The reader of Willingham's own audiobook did a wonderful job, for example, but there were jokes stepped on, punch lines that didn't quite land the way Willingham exactly intended. (This, incidentally, is why listening to one of those recent books in the funny female memoir genre — like Amy Poehler's Yes Please — is often a much better experience than reading them.) "The idea that you are experiencing the novel in a way the author did not intend, that you're missing out in some way — I'm much more open to that than 'You listened to it, you big cheater,'" Willingham said.

The literary value of audiobooks versus print books — that's up for wider interpretation. But there's another way to consider the question of cheating, one that, incidentally, annoys Willingham the most. On my commute this week, for example, I began listening to H Is for Hawk, and so some might argue that, once I'm done, I can't claim to have really "read" it. "There are people who think of reading as a sort of achievement, a mark of honor that you've done something worthy of respect," Willingham said. "There's this sense that when you have read a book, you've done something that is worthy of pride, and it is worthy of other people patting you on the back."

This, to his mind, is nonsense, a holdover from elementary-school days. "You know, there are classrooms that are set up with that very much in mind," he said. "There's a reader wall and you get a star next to your name every time you finish a book, and the number of books is counted. And I think some of that feeling in adults may be ... a hangover from prior school experiences." It's a rather sad way to view reading as an adult, he contends, and he has a point. After all, grown-ups can't exchange a list of books they've read for a free personal pan pizza.

Is listening to a book 'cheating?'

The Washington Post

07.31.2016

By Valerie Strauss

Ever since audiobooks began to gain in popularity more than a decade ago, this question has been raised: Are kids who listen to assigned books rather than reading them actually cheating? Is reading a book anywhere near the same thing as listening?

In this post, cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham asks and answers these questions. Willingham is a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, where he has taught since 1992. Until about 2000, his research focused on the brain basis of learning and memory, and today, it concerns the application of cognitive psychology to K-16 education. He is the author of "Why Don't Students Like School?"and "When Can You Trust the Experts?" and "Raising Kids Who Read." He blogs here, and his posts have been appeared frequently over the years on this blog, including "What is developmentally appropriate in learning," and "Why kids lose interest in reading as they get older." This appeared on his blog. He gave me permission to publish it.

By Daniel Willingham

I've been asked this question a lot and I hate it. I'll describe why in a bit, but for now I'll just change it to "does your mind do more or less the same thing when you listening to an audiobook and when you read print?"

The short answer is "mostly."

An influential model of reading is the simple view (Gough & Tumner, 1986), which claims that two fundamental processes contribute to reading: decoding and language processing. "Decoding" obviously refers to figuring out words from print. "Language processing" refers to the same mental processes you use for oral language. Reading, as an evolutionary late-comer, must piggy-back on mental processes that already existed, and spoken communication does much of the lending.

So according to the simple model, listening to an audio book is exactly like reading print, except that the latter requires decoding and the former doesn't.

Is the simple view right?

Some predictions you'd derive from the simple view are supported. For example, You'd expect that a lot of the difference in reading proficiency in the early grades would be due to differences in decoding. In later grades, most children are pretty fluent decoders so differences in decoding would be more due to processes that support comprehension. That prediction seems to be true (e.g., Tilstra et al, 2009).

Especially relevant to the question of audiobooks, you'd also predict that for typical adults (who decode fluently) listening comprehension and reading comprehension would be mostly the same thing. And experiments show very high correlations of scores on listening and reading comprehension tests in adults (Bell & Perfetti, 1994; Gernsbacher, Varner, & Faust, 1990).

The simple view is a useful way to think about the mental processes involved in reading, especially for texts that are more similar to spoken language, and that we read for purposes similar to those of listening. The simple view is less applicable when we put reading to other purposes, e.g., when students study a text for a quiz, or when we scan texts looking for a fact as part of a research project.

The simple view is also likely incomplete for certain types of texts. The written word is not always similar to speech. In such cases prosody might be an aid to comprehension. Prosody refers to changes in pacing, pitch, and rhythm in speech. "I really enjoy your blog" can either be a sincere compliment or a sarcastic put-down — both look identical on the page, and prosody would communicate the difference in spoken language.

We do hear voices in our heads as we read, and sometimes this effect can be notable, as when we know the sound of the purported author's voice (e.g., Kosslyn & Matt, 1977). For audiobooks, the reader doesn't need to supply the prosody — whoever is reading the book aloud does so.

For difficult-to-understand texts, prosody can be a real aid to understanding. Shakespearean plays provide ready examples. When Juliet says "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" it's common for students to think that "wherefore" means "where," and Juliet (who in fact doesn't know Romeo is nearby at that moment) is wondering where Romeo is. "Wherefore" actually means "why" and she's wondering why he's called Romeo, and why names, which are arbitrary, could matter at all. An actress can communicate the intended meaning of "Wherefore art thou Romeo" through prosody, although the movie clip below doesn't offer a terrific example.

So listening to an audiobook may have more information that will make comprehension a little easier. Prosody might clarify the meaning of ambiguous words or help you to assign syntactic roles to words.

But most of the time it doesn't, because most of what you listen to is not that complicated. For most books, for most purposes, listening and reading are more or less the same thing.

So listening to an audiobook is not "cheating," but let me tell you why I objected to phrasing the question that way. "Cheating" implies an unfair advantage, as though you are receiving a benefit while skirting some work. Why talk about reading as though it were work?

Listening to an audiobook might be considered cheating if the act of decoding were the point; audio books allow you to seem to have decoded without doing so. But if appreciating the language and the story is the point, it's not. Comparing audio books to cheating is like meeting a friend at Disneyland and saying: "You took a bus here? I drove myself, you big cheater."

The point is getting to and enjoying the destination. The point is not how you traveled.

Why Listen?

Using Audiobooks to Support Literacy

By Rose Brock, Ph.D.

Dr. Rose Brock is currently an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University. Her classroom experience includes teaching English and reading in Irving, TX. In 2013, Dr. Brock published her dissertation, "AUDIOBOOKS AND ATTITUDES: SCHOOL LIBRARIANS' PERSPECTIVES", and she serves as an advisor to the national literacy initiative, *Guys Listen*, part of the *Guys Read* program.

More audiobook Resources available @ www.booksontape.com

Listening Library

BOOKS ON TAPE

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 spans[5]
- 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.

LISTEN AND LEARN:

A+ for Audiobooks

If you haven't tried incorporating Listening Library® audiobooks into your English Language Arts/Reading classroom instruction, now is the time!

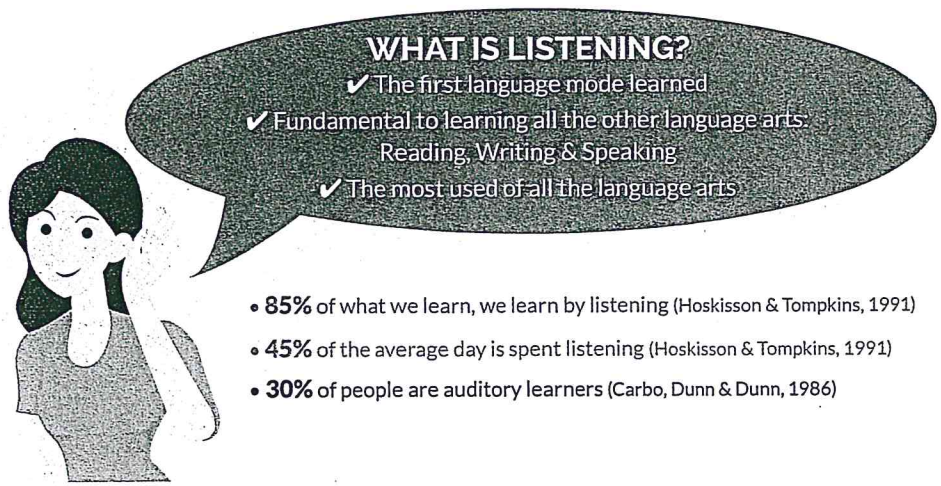
Whether you teach struggling readers, gifted readers, or all the students in between, teaching with audiobooks is good instructional practice.

LISTENING & READING CONNECTIONS

	READING	LISTENING
LANGUAGE BASED	☑	☑
VOCABULARY BASIS IS ORAL	☑	☑
INCLUDES COMMON SKILLS AND PROCESSES (SUCH AS NOTING DETAILS, MAKING INFERENCES, ETC.)	☑	☑
REQUIRES THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING	☑	☑

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LISTENING & READING

	READING	LISTENING
PROVIDES ADDITIONAL NONVERBAL CUES		☑
DEMONSTRATES A WIDER VARIATION IN SOUND PATTERNS		☑



- **85%** of what we learn, we learn by listening (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1991)
- **45%** of the average day is spent listening (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1991)
- **30%** of people are auditory learners (Carbo, Dunn & Dunn, 1986)

USING AUDIOBOOKS IN THE CLASSROOM PROVIDES A MEDIUM FOR DEVELOPMENT

The spoken word gives students opportunities to experience lessons that are instructional, engaging, and rewarding.

WHY AUDIOBOOKS MAKE THE GRADE:

They increase...

- ✔ Appreciation for literary language and expand vocabulary, including pronunciation and semantics
- ✔ Understanding of correct pronunciation of English, dialects, and non-English words
- ✔ Attention spans and listening skills (main ideas, details, sequencing, predicting, etc.)
- ✔ Motivation and interest
- ✔ Exposure to a variety of genres (including "harder" classics)

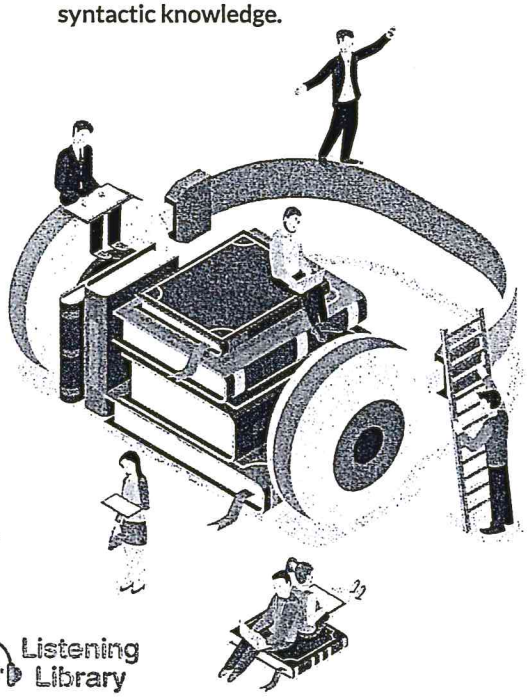
They provide...

- ✔ A level playing field for a wide range of learners and abilities
- ✔ A sense of intimacy and human connection

They encourage...

- ✔ Higher level and critical thinking, interpretation, and imagination
- ✔ Interpretation of paralinguistic features (vocal qualities)

Bonus: When paired with matching text, audiobooks reinforce word, phonic, and syntactic knowledge.



HAPPY LISTENING!

This audiobook report card was created with the assistance of Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor in Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Brock's research interests focus on audiobooks as tools of literacy, and she is cofounder of the national literacy initiative *Guys Listen*, part of the *Guys Read* program.

www.booksontape.com

Listening Library

1. While listening to this passage, write down **evocative words, phrases, or figurative language**.

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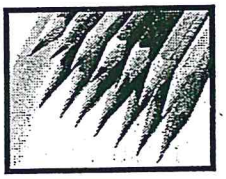
2. Create an **image** based on the details in Step 1:



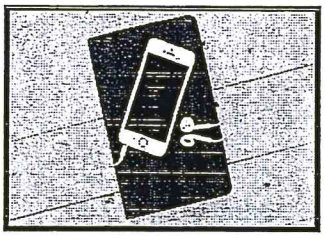
3. Go back and circle, then label **literary techniques** in the details you noted.

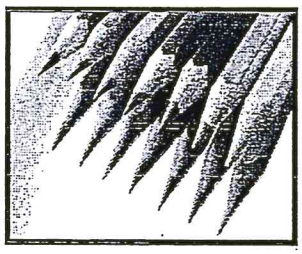
4. Using the words and phrases above, what do you think is the **mood of the passage?** _____ Go back to your **drawing** & see how you can further convey this mood.

Ideas for Using Audiobooks in the Classroom

Because when students can listen,
they can concentrate on analyzing the literary features of the text.

1. **Listen** for evocative details and **create a visual response** (see activity).
2. **Annotate** for literary techniques & make conclusions regarding mood and/or themes as dramatized by the narrator (see activity).
3. **Gather details** that specifically highlight an assigned character or setting. Students then form jigsaw* groups to share information regarding characters, setting, themes, symbols, etc. from the text.
4. **Post-it** and **brainstorm meanings** for unknown vocabulary. Students will better understand new vocabulary after hearing use of words in context.
5. **Learn** use of punctuation and hear how a writer creates rhythm and voice through listening to a professional narrator. Students can then **apply this knowledge** to their own writing.
6. **Recognize & understand tone** through reading a text then listening to professional narration of the same text.





*Jigsaw groups: Students first join groups where everyone is assigned the same character/setting/symbol. They share their individual ideas about that subject so that they all become experts on that one specific topic. They then reform groups so that one 'expert' on each topic is present in the new group. Now each student 'expert' teaches the other group members his/her information.