

## Academic Listening Skills

The Listening section measures your ability to understand spoken English. In academic settings, you must be able to listen to lectures and conversations. Academic listening is typically done for one of the three following purposes:

### Listening for Basic Comprehension

- Comprehend the main idea, major points and important details related to the main idea

### Listening for Pragmatic Understanding<sup>1</sup>

- Recognize a speaker's attitude and degree of certainty
- Recognize a speaker's function or purpose

### Connecting and Synthesizing<sup>2</sup> Information

- Recognize the organization of information presented
- Understand the relationships between ideas presented (for example: compare/contrast, cause/effect or steps in a process)
- Make inferences and draw conclusions based on what is implied in the material
- Make connections among pieces of information in a conversation or lecture
- Recognize topic changes in lectures and conversations, and recognize introductions and conclusions in lectures

### Listening Section Description

Listening material in the test includes academic lectures and conversations in which the speech sounds very natural. You can take notes on any listening material throughout the entire test.

<sup>1</sup>Pragmatic understanding: To understand a speaker's purpose, attitude, degree of certainty, etc.

<sup>2</sup>Synthesize: To combine information from two or more sources

Most of the questions that follow the lectures and conversations are traditional multiple-choice questions with four answer choices and a single correct answer. There are, however, some other types of questions:

- Multiple-choice questions with more than one answer (for example: two answers out of four or more choices)
- Questions that require you to put in order events or steps in a process
- Questions that require you to match objects or text to categories in a table

Listening Material	Number of Questions	Timing
4–6 lectures, 3–5 minutes long	6 questions per lecture	60–90 minutes
2–3 conversations, about 3 minutes long	5 questions per conversation	

## Academic Lectures

The lectures in the TOEFL iBT® test reflect the kind of listening and speaking that occurs in the classroom. In some of the lectures, the professor does all or almost all of the talking, with an occasional comment by a student. In other lectures, the professor may engage the students in discussion by asking questions that are answered by the students. The photos that accompany the lectures indicate whether one person or several people will be speaking.

## Conversations in an Academic Setting

The conversations in the TOEFL iBT test may take place during an office meeting with a professor or teaching assistant, or during a service encounter with university staff. The contents of the office conversations are generally academic in nature or related to course requirements. Service encounters could involve conversations about a housing payment, registering for a class or requesting information at the library. The photos that accompany the conversations help you imagine the setting and the roles of the speakers.

## Listening Skills Practice

Listening to the English language frequently and reading a wide variety of academic materials is the best way to increase vocabulary and improve listening skills.

Watching movies and television shows and listening to the radio provide excellent opportunities to build listening skills. You are typically more engaged when you listen to entertaining material. Movies, television shows and live interviews are especially useful because they also provide visual reinforcement and cues.

**Complete these Week 4 tasks and update the checklist on page 10.**

- **ePLAN** Review sample Listening questions in *Planner Appendix 1* and experience them on the *Planner* website at [www.ets.org/toefl/planner](http://www.ets.org/toefl/planner)

Audiotapes and CDs of books, lectures and presentations are equally valuable and are available at libraries and bookstores. Also, many public libraries and most universities have their public lectures available online. Lectures with transcripts are particularly helpful. The Internet is a great resource for listening material—visit websites such as [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org), [www.cnn.com/services/podcasting](http://www.cnn.com/services/podcasting), [www.audiobooksforfree.com](http://www.audiobooksforfree.com), [www.youthradio.org](http://www.youthradio.org), [www.bbc.co.uk/radio](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio) and [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish).

## General Listening Activities

You might try these general activities to build your listening skills:

- Listen to different kinds of material on a variety of topics, of increasing length and difficulty.
  - Start with recordings on familiar topics and gradually progress to topics that are new to you.

First, listen to conversations, television shows and movies, and then listen to programs with academic content, such as NPR and BBC broadcasts. Start with short segments and progress to longer segments.

- Listen several times to each recording:
  - o For beginners, listen first with English subtitles, if they are available. Then, without subtitles, listen for the main ideas and key details.
  - o Listen again to understand the connections between ideas, the structure of the talk and/or the speakers' attitudes and to distinguish fact from opinion.
- Listen actively:
  - o Take notes as you listen for main ideas and important details. Write down key words only, not every word.
  - o Keep a log of the new words and expressions you hear. Check the spelling and meaning in a dictionary.
  - o Ask yourself about the basic information presented in the recording (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?).
  - o Make predictions about what you will hear next.
  - o Use your notes to summarize what you've heard.
- Copy a script from an online news story, lecture or talk, movie or podcast. Delete or cover every fifth word on the script. Listen to the recording, and try to write in the missing words.

The Listening section does not measure summarizing skills, but practicing summarizing is useful for the integrated tasks in the Speaking and Writing sections.

- Listen to the news or a lecture online and read the script at the same time. Listen closely and highlight the stressed words in the script. Try to identify **why** the speaker stresses specific words.
- Listen to a portion of a lecture or talk and create a list of important points. Use the list to write a brief summary. Gradually listen to the entire lecture and combine the summaries for each part into a summary of the whole lecture.

## Targeted Activities

### Listening for Pragmatic Understanding

- As you listen to movies, television shows and lectures:
  - Think about what each speaker hopes to accomplish. What is the purpose of the lecture or conversation? For example, is the speaker apologizing, complaining, inviting or making suggestions?
  - Notice each speaker's style. Is the language formal or casual? How certain does each speaker sound? Is the speaker's voice calm or emotional? What does the speaker's tone of voice tell you?
  - Notice the speaker's degree of certainty. How sure is the speaker about the information? Does the speaker's tone of voice indicate something about his/her degree of certainty?
  - Pay attention to the way stress and intonation patterns are used to convey meaning. Replay segments multiple times, listening for shades of meaning. This will help you understand a speaker's point of view.
  - Listen for changes in topic. What transitions are used?
  - Listen for repetitions of ideas and paraphrases. How do speakers reinforce their points?

**Vocabulary tip:** Don't memorize low-frequency technical vocabulary. These words are usually defined within a text or listening passage. Focus on learning high-frequency language that crosses all disciplines.

## Targeted Activities

### Listening to Connect and Synthesize Ideas

Complete these Week 4 tasks and update the checklist on page 10.

- Pick three general activities and three targeted activities from pages 17–20 to work on your Listening skills.
- **OG** Use the Listening chapter in *The Official Guide to the TOEFL® Test* (Chapter 3) for more practice.

- As you are listening to recorded lectures or talks:
  - Think about how what you're hearing is organized. Listen for the signal words that indicate the introduction, major steps or ideas, examples and the conclusion or summary.
  - Identify the relationships between ideas. Possible relationships include cause/effect, compare/contrast and steps in a process.
  - Listen for transitions that show connections and relationships between ideas. How do speakers introduce and organize their points?
  - Predict what information or idea will be expressed next.
  - Stop the recording at various points. Summarize what you just heard or what you've heard up to that point.
  - Practice listening for and comparing two speakers' viewpoints. Which speaker supports the idea and which is against it? What words do speakers use to support their ideas? Are the words mainly positive or negative?

**Vocabulary tip:** Understanding phrasal verbs and common idioms will help you with the Listening section of the TOEFL iBT® test because phrasal verbs and idioms are often used in informal conversations.