

Basics

Listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing is a physical process that happens automatically, whereas listening is a skill that has a purpose. If you know clearly why you are listening, you can use the correct strategies to obtain the information you want.

The academic context

In the classroom, there are lots of situations when you have to listen, each with a different purpose. You can be listening to a lecture and taking notes to study later, or listening to a colleague to understand their opinion. Whatever the task, knowing clearly your purpose will help you understand better.

Key features

- *How* you're going to listen depends a lot on *why* you are listening. Here are some common purposes for listening:
 - Listen for the main idea: when we only need to understand the general idea and the details are not important.
Example: You're having a conversation in a noisy place and don't get everything they say.
 - Listen for specific details: when we're only listening to understand certain information, and the rest is irrelevant.
Example: You're watching a sports programme to know if your team won.
 - Listen to make notes: when we need a written record that we will need later.
Example: Your friend is absent today and asked you to tell her what happened in the lesson.
 - Listen for a sequence: in some situations, not only the information is important, but also the order it is in.
Example: You're watching a video with a recipe.
 - Listen for pleasure or interest: when we don't have a practical reason to listen, and we only want to have fun.
Example: You're watching the latest season of your favourite series.
 - Listen for attitude and opinion: sometimes there is a difference between the exact words someone says, and what they actually mean.
Example: Someone saying *Well, that's just great!* can have very different meanings depending on the intonation: they can be really excited about something or be angry and sarcastic.
 - Listen intensively: we need to understand every single word of the listening.
Example: Your friend is giving you directions to his birthday party.
- When doing a test, the task will indicate what type of listening is required. Do you have to answer questions, or maybe fill in a table?
- In 'real life', your purpose will depend on the situation. If you are watching a film, for instance, your purpose might be to understand and enjoy the story. If you're watching a lecture, your purpose might be to take notes and use them to study later.

Challenges / difficulties

In a test, the purpose of listening is usually made clear by the task. However, in everyday situations in and out of the classroom, it might not be that obvious. You have to ask yourself *why* you need to listen and what result you want from it.

How can I develop this skill?

You listen to a variety of things inside and outside the classroom every day. In order to improve your listening skills, make a habit of asking yourself beforehand why you are listening – that is, what information do you need, and what do you need it for? Do you want to have a general idea of what they are saying, do you need to get specific details, or do you need to understand every single thing?

If you make a habit of asking yourself and becoming clear in your own mind about your purpose in listening, you will be able to automatically apply the strategies needed to achieve that goal.

Learning outcome

If you understand clearly why you are listening, you can focus on what really matters: the general idea, specific detail or something else, like the mood of the speaker.

Theory to practice

1 Match the situations (1–7) to the purposes of listening (a–g).

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| a Listen for the main idea | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b Listen for specific details | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c Listen to take notes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d Listen for a sequence | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e Listen for pleasure | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f Listen for attitude or opinion | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g Listen intensively | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- 1** You want to know if a colleague agrees with you in a class discussion.
- 2** Your teacher is explaining the process to solve an equation.
- 3** You love history and your teacher recommended a podcast.
- 4** Your teacher is doing a dictation in a foreign language.
- 5** Your teacher is reading out the answers from the last test. You made only three mistakes.
- 6** You have to summarize a historical event in one sentence.
- 7** You are in a congress and your teacher asked you to write a report on it.

2 Look at this task. What is the purpose of listening?

- 1** Dan moved into a new ...
- a** house. **b** apartment. **c** room.

3 Read the transcript and answer the questions below.

- Dan** Hi, Tom. How are you?
- Tom** Oh, hi, Dan. I'm fine. How are you? Tell me about your new apartment.
- Dan** It's really nice. You must come and see it.
- Tom** I will. Is it in a nice part of the city?
- Dan** Yes. It's only two minutes from a park.
- Tom** That's good. Are there any good restaurants nearby?
- Dan** Yes, there are three very nice restaurants. An Italian, a French and a Japanese restaurant.
- Tom** Great.
- Dan** But there aren't any cafés.
- Tom** That's not so good. How do you get to the university?
- Dan** I go by bus.
- Tom** Is there a bus stop near the apartment?
- Dan** No, there isn't. It's ten minutes from here. And the subway is really far, about 15 minutes.
- Tom** Are there any shops?
- Dan** Yes. There's a supermarket on the next street, about a minute from here.

- 1 Dan moved into a new ...
a house. **b** apartment. **c** room.
- 2 There is a park ... minutes away.
a two **b** three **c** five
- 3 There's a ... restaurant near his apartment.
a Greek **b** French **c** Thai
- 4 He goes to the university ...
a on foot. **b** on the subway. **c** by bus.

Ways to get more practice

We listen to a lot of things in our daily life, at home or at school. Make a habit of asking yourself why you are going to listen to something before you start, what your objective is. That will also help you see how successful your listening was afterwards. Did you reach the objective you set?