

Basics

Using visuals to aid understanding is a key skill when listening to talks in academic settings. Speakers in lectures, presentations and seminars use slides and other media to support their ideas, signpost the structure of the talk, highlight key topic changes and explain visually complex machinery, models and processes. By assessing the purpose of each visual, understanding its importance and what the listener is required to do, you are better able to focus on the main ideas and relevant details of the talk.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to use visuals to aid understanding as you listen to talks, such as lectures, presentations, seminars and discussions.

Key features

Before you listen

- Look at handouts ahead of the talk and think about the topic. What is the subject of the material you are going to listen to? What sort of information are you expecting to hear?
- Assess what type of information is shown in the visual: text, image, description, chart, table, etc.
- Think about the purpose of the visual: lecture outline, detailed notes, example image, visual description of complex concept, etc. Do you need to add any information to it? Handouts could require you to annotate, label, highlight key items or add sources, etc.

While you are listening

- Listen to how and when the speaker refers to the visual so listeners know when to shift their attention.
- Think about the importance of the slide based on purpose and information type and how long the speaker uses it for.
- Think about what you must do as a listener with the visual based on its level of importance: take notes, label or simply listen without taking any notes.
- Think about the end result: Will you need to use the visual later to review the talk? Is it less important and only used as a quick example or is it central to the ideas in the talk?
- Note titles, outlines, hierarchy of text (headings, subheadings, etc.) and sources of visuals in talks to accurately refer to the visual later.

Challenges / difficulties

It takes discipline to focus on what is being said and annotate slides or images. You can lose focus and not understand the key ideas from the talk if you are too focused on copying everything.

Maintaining concentration can be a challenge, as is shifting attention between the speaker and the visual.

Try to get as much practice of listening to talks with slides and visuals as you can.

How can I develop this skill?

One way to help develop this skill is to focus on the visual aspect of everything and try to work out what information it is providing and what the purpose of the visual is. For example, in magazines or newspapers, look only at the images and think about what they show, why they are there and what message they are trying to give. Then check your predictions by reading any text that goes with the images.

Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill you will be able to interpret a wide variety of visuals in different listening situations by understanding their purpose, assessing the information shown and appreciating how they relate to the ideas in the talk.

Theory to practice

Look at the visual from a lecture below. Then answer the questions.

Lecture 2: Financial institutions

1 Types of institution: overview of key bank types

- Retail banks
- Investment banks
- Insurance companies
- Building societies

2 Deregulation

- Pre-regulation (deregulated industry, 80s to 90s)
- Current regulated industry
- Pre- vs current practices, e.g. conglomerates, etc.

3 Specialized banks

- Central banks
- Private banks
- Clearing banks



Source: Finance for 1st Century, Money Press, 2017

- a What purpose does the slide have?
- b What type of information is shown?
- c What is its title, sources, headings, subheadings, etc.?
- d What should the student do when they see this in a lecture?
- e When would it appear in a lecture?
- f What might the speaker say to draw attention to it?

Ways to get more practice

- Work with a partner. Take turns to find lecture slides to show your partner. Answer the questions from above about the slides.
- Listen to spoken English talks on the internet which include slides and visuals, and note down key information from each slide.