

Basics

Listening to infer information is a key part of communication in all settings. In an academic setting, this skill can help the listener overcome difficulties in understanding what is being said because a speaker is talking too quickly, or because of a noisy lecture hall, a lack of visual support to help listeners or a lack of knowledge of the topic. Listeners can use clues to make educated guesses about the information being conveyed using the speaker's background, voice, language choices and tone, facial and physical gestures, and slides and graphics used to support the information. By using these clues, you will be better able to infer what is being said, what the important points are and what you need to remember.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to listen to infer information. Examples include lectures, tutorials, seminars, debates and face-to-face conversations.

Key features

Before you listen

- 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?
- Find out a little about the speaker, their role, research interests, etc. These background details can tell us about their beliefs and stance towards the ideas they are talking about. What is the purpose of their talk? Should you expect their attitude to be critical or supportive?
- Think about any handouts: What do the slides tell you about the content?

While you're listening

- Don't worry about words you don't understand.
- Take clues from the speaker's tone of voice about how they feel about the information, e.g. supportive or critical, interested or dismissive, confident or tentative.
- Listen for key phrases the speaker uses which convey how they feel about the topic.
- Watch for visual cues from the speaker: both facial gestures and posture can inform us about the speaker's attitude to the information.
- Look for visual clues on handouts and slides to support the speaker's argument or confirm what you think is being said.

Challenges / difficulties

It takes discipline to focus on the clues when you are listening and taking notes on the information. Many clues, such as voice and gestures can be different culture to culture, so may be difficult to interpret.

How can I develop this skill?

To develop this skill, try to get as much practice as you can at listening to and watching videos of talks, lectures and presentations. If you sometimes watch TV, you can also develop this skill in the following ways:

- Watch a programme with the sound turned down: use facial expressions and movements to interpret what is being said and what's happening generally.
- Have the sound up, but close your eyes: listen to the dialogue and try to imagine what's happening on screen, then open your eyes to see if your predictions were correct.

Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill you will be able to understand the facial expressions, gestures and posture of the speaker to infer their attitude to the information. You will also learn to identify changes in the speaker's voice which will inform you about their attitude towards the ideas being discussed. You will be able to infer the speaker's tone by the word choices they make, and will better understand the purpose of the talk.

Theory to practice

Look at the presentation transcript below. Look at the highlighted phrases.

There are two current theories to explain the phenomena of deep space radio signals. Many researchers seem to support the theory that a neutron star is to blame. It is widely accepted as the most probable explanation for what is happening. The quickly rotating star causes bursts of high-frequency signals to be emitted throughout the galaxy. Other space scientists suggest that a black hole may possibly be responsible for the mysterious radio signals, which could have begun as a star hit a black hole here or in another neighbouring galaxy. A few pseudoscientists have put forward the view it could even be the result of alien life forms broadcasting into space. This ludicrous suggestion has been roundly rejected by the serious scientific community as there is zero evidence of this being the case.

- 1 Which idea is the speaker:
 - supportive of?
 - neutral about?
 - dismissive of?
- 2 Would you highlight any other phrases that show the speaker's attitude?
- 3 What other phrases could the speaker use to show their attitude to the ideas?

Ways to get more practice

Listen to spoken English talks, lectures and presentations on the internet as much as you can, and note down what you think the speaker's attitude is towards the subject and the words that tell you this.