

Basics

Listening to descriptions of visual data (graphs, charts, tables, etc.) is a key skill in academic settings. By listening for spoken references to data, including explanations of the visual components and changes in the values of data, you will better interpret the significance of the speaker's ideas.

The academic context

In the academic world, there are numerous situations where you need to listen to descriptions of visual data. Examples include: lectures, tutorials, seminars and presentations.

Key features

- Understand the different ways data is expressed visually through:
 - charts
 - graphs
 - tables
 - diagrams
- Listen for references from the speaker as they talk about visuals or parts of visuals:
As graph 4 shows ...
- Infer the content of the visuals from the presentation's subject, the visual's title and an understanding of the x and y axis components.
- Take clues from the speaker and the language they use to describe changes in significant data:
go up drop level off slight changes dramatic changes
- Annotate the visuals used in the presentation to highlight key data and its significance.

There are some ways you can prepare yourself to listen to descriptions of visual data:

- 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? What might some of the data be?
- Think about the purpose: What are the main ideas or conclusions the speaker wants to present?
- Think about how the visuals are presented: Are they on handouts beforehand? Are they shown on slides during the presentation?
- Think about the end result: What will you need to remember and why? Which parts of the chart or table are significant?

Challenges / difficulties

It takes discipline to focus on language referencing a visual aid and to quickly understand its components, the significant data represented and the conclusions the speaker wishes to draw from it.

Maintaining concentration while listening, looking at the visual data and writing notes on it, can be a challenge. Try to get as much practice of listening to descriptions of visual data (presentations, research, etc.) as you can.

How can I develop this skill?

Listen to spoken descriptions of visual data on the internet as much as you can, noting down key data and findings you hear.

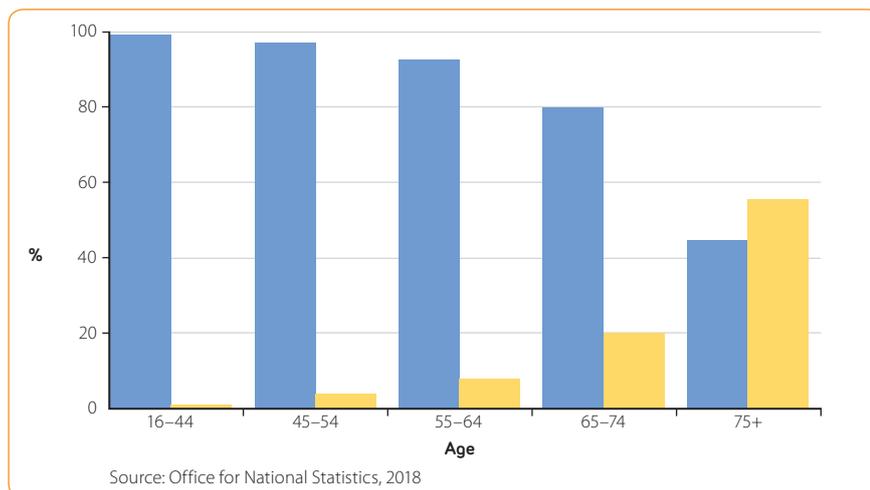
Learning outcome

When you have mastered this skill, you will be able to listen to visual data descriptions in a variety of academic settings and understand both what the data represents and the significance of the figures to the speaker's overall ideas.

Theory to practice

Look at the chart and the presentation transcript below. Match the highlighted phrases (1-10) to their functions (a-i).

- a showing a large fall in value (verb + adverb) _____
- b showing a large rise in value (adjective + noun) _____
- c showing a large rise in value (verb + adverb) _____
- d showing a small fall in value (adjective + noun) _____
- e showing a small rise in value (verb + adverb) _____
- f introducing the significant data and conclusions _____
- g giving the title of the visual _____
- h explaining what the visual data represents _____
- i referring to the x axis values _____



The chart shows¹ the percentage of UK internet users by age group in 2018. You can see the age groups along the bottom.² The percentage of regular internet users for each age group is shown in blue³ and the number of non-users (people who haven't accessed the internet in the previous three months) is shown in yellow.⁴

Obviously, the percentage of internet users among 16-44 year olds is predictably high, with less than 1% of this demographic never using the internet or not having used it in the last three months. There is a slight decrease⁵ in the percentage of users in the 45-54 group and similarly in the 55-64 group. At the same time, the number of non-users increases gradually⁶ across these groups. However, there is a sharp jump⁷ in the percentage of people not using the internet from the 65-74 group to the next demographic (75+). Correspondingly, the number of users falls dramatically⁸ between the same groups. Why is this level of use in the final demographic of importance?⁹ Clearly, much work is required to enable older people to have access to and confidence in using the internet. Usage in 65-74 year olds has jumped significantly from 2011¹⁰ (52%) to 2018 (80%) due to courses and library-based facilities. We must now focus on helping the over-75s to do the same.

Ways to get more practice

Take turns with a partner to find visual data (graphs, charts, etc.) and describe them to your partner. Your partner should note key information, such as the title, what the axes represent and significant data to highlight, including conclusions to draw from it.