

Basics

When you're listening (or reading), it's important to know the difference between facts and opinions. We can prove, or show, that facts are true or false – there is evidence. An opinion expresses an emotion – how somebody feels about something – so we can't prove whether or not it's true.

Fact	Paris is the capital of France.
Opinion	Paris is one of Europe's most beautiful cities.

Sometimes when you listen, it's clear the speaker is stating facts – a lecture about a historical event, for example. Sometimes when you listen, it's clear the speaker is expressing an opinion – a friend talking about their favourite pop song might not include many facts. In many cases, however, a speaker will both state facts and express opinions, and you need to distinguish (understand the difference) between them.

The academic context

You don't usually need to distinguish between fact and opinion as an actual task in academic work. However, recognizing the difference is a very important information skill.

Key features

- We can prove that facts are true (correct) or false (incorrect).
- Factual information often includes details like names, numbers and percentages.
- An opinion is emotional. It shows the speaker's stance. We cannot prove that it is true or false.
- We often state facts using auxiliary verbs – *is, do, have*, etc.
- We often express opinions with modal verbs – *might, should, must*, etc.
- Opinions are often also introduced with phrases like:

I think ...
In my opinion ...
It seems that ...
To my mind ...

- Opinions often include positive and negative adjectives like *great, perfect, terrible*, etc.

Challenges / difficulties

It isn't always easy to distinguish between facts and opinions. If somebody says *Chocolate is delicious*, most people agree, but that doesn't make it a fact. We can't prove it's true. Speakers often express opinion as facts because they want people to agree. If a politician says *We need to spend less money on education*, it is not a fact.

How can I develop this skill?

Before you listen, think about the topic of the lecture. Predict whether you will hear a lot of facts or mostly somebody's opinion. Learn more phrases that typically introduce opinions so that you know when the speaker is giving an opinion.

Learning outcome

When you have learnt this skill, you will:

- listen more confidently in lectures and other academic situations
- transfer the skill to your reading

Theory to practice

1 Read the sentences and decide if they are facts or opinions.

- a The best ice cream flavour is strawberry.
- b Many people's favourite ice cream flavour is strawberry.
- c Business law is an especially interesting part of my course.
- d I have about 15 contact hours in a typical week.
- e These days, people drive everywhere.
- f Car use has increased dramatically over the last 50 years.

Fact

Opinion

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2 Now read the explanations of the answers to Exercise 1.

- a Opinion – many people like other flavours more.
- b Fact – we can prove that, e.g. more than 50% of people prefer strawberry.
- c Opinion – some people will think that business law is not interesting.
- d Fact – we can prove this by looking at the timetable.
- e Opinion – people use their cars for many journeys, but we cannot prove that they use no other means of transport. The speaker wants to make a strong opinion sound like a fact.
- f Fact – we can prove this with statistical data.

3 01 Listen to two extracts. Which one has more facts, and which has more opinions?

More facts

More opinions

- a ☐ ☐
- b ☐ ☐

4 Read the transcript from Exercise 3 and the explanations below.

Transcript

01

- a Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth. It is 8,848 metres, or 29,028 feet, above sea level. It is located in the Mahalangur section of the Himalayas. Half of Everest is in Nepal and half is in China. There are two main climbing routes: one from the south-east and one from the north. There is a sign for new climbers. The climbers set up a base camp at the bottom of the mountain. They wait for good weather before they climb to the top.
- b I'm not sure I like her architecture. Sometimes I don't think her buildings fit with other buildings nearby. For example, the Serpentine Gallery, the building in the second photo, is certainly very interesting, with all its curves, but to me it looks strange next to the old building. They don't really go together.

- a This is all facts – there are no opinions. There are a lot of details like place names and numbers, and the speaker uses simple grammatical forms.
- b This is almost all opinions. The key phrases which show that the speaker is expressing opinions are highlighted.

5 ▶ 02 Listen to another extract. Can you hear only facts, only opinions, or both facts and opinions?

6 ▶ 02 Listen again and read the transcript. Highlight the facts and the opinions.

Transcript

▶ 02

Paulo is a submarine chef. He cooks for 100 of his colleagues, three times a day. His food is healthy and delicious! It's very tiring, and submarines are cramped and smelly. But submarine chefs are well paid, and they have long holidays.

Ways to get more practice

- Watch the news on TV, or listen to it on the radio. See if you can distinguish the opinions from the facts.
- Read texts that express opinions, and highlight examples of key phrases to help you understand when you listen.