

Basics

There are lots of situations where information is presented in a particular order, such as when people give directions or describe a procedure. It is important to understand when this is happening, so that you can listen for what happens first, second, etc.

The academic context

In lectures and academic presentations, the order of events is very important, and ensuring you understand the sequence correctly can be critical. For example, understanding cause-and-effect discussions or descriptions of processes requires you to listen for the order of events.

Key features

There are several techniques that we can use to understand the order of events when we listen.

These include:

- Identifying ordinal words such as *first/firstly, second/secondly, third/thirdly*.
- Identifying sequencing words or phrases, such as *initially, next, then, subsequently, after that* and *at the same time*.
- Identifying cause-and-effect phrases, such as *because of, consequently, as a result of* and *due to*.
- Recognizing when tenses are used to establish a sequence of events, e.g. *When we finished the project, we had spent at least three weeks on it*.
- Using sentence stress. Many of the words and phrases listed here will be stressed by the speaker to draw your attention to the sequence.

Challenges / difficulties

It can be very hard to hear every event in a sequence if the speaker is talking quickly. In addition, some speakers present events out of sequence, e.g. *The tray is placed into an oven which has been preheated to 220°C*. In this case, the oven is heated *first*; but the speaker tells you firstly about putting the tray in, and *then* about preheating the oven.

How can I develop this skill?

When you are listening, learn to listen for the words and phrases listed in the Key features section. Then, each time you listen, notice how events are introduced or 'signposted'.

Learning outcome

As well as understanding more, you will also find it easier to remember important information when you have understood it in the correct order. This will help you when it comes to revising for exams or preparing essays.

Theory to practice

Work alone or with another student. Add more words and phrases to the table here and on the next page, as in the examples.

Ordinal words	Sequencing words/phrases	Cause and effect words/phrases
first/firstly	next	due to

Tenses with time words and phrases

By the time they reached the station, Anita had gone.

Ways to get more practice

You can find a huge number of sources online. Try listening to talk radio or podcasts. Train yourself to listen for the 'signpost' words which help you to put things in order. You might find it helpful to write numbered notes or draw a flow chart as you listen.