

Basics

Signposts and signals are words and phrases which a speaker uses to help you understand the structure of their argument. For example, they can use signposts and signals to tell you how important something is, compared to the other things they have said. Or they can use them to indicate the main points they will discuss. These kinds of phrase are very important in lectures, presentations, speeches and talks, because you have to listen to a lot of information, which can be difficult to note down or understand due to its wordiness. Unlike written text, you cannot skim or scan spoken text, but fortunately, most lecturers and speakers will guide you. They will signpost the way using words and phrases which enable you to follow what they are saying.

The academic context

At college or university, you will probably have to listen to lectures and talks, and you will want to make good notes from them. Once you understand verbal signposting, you will find this task much easier. This is because you will know what to expect, what to focus on and how to summarize your notes well.

Key features

Signposting language showing the overall organization of a lecture/talk

Starting a lecture	I'd like to begin by ... Today's talk will be about ... We will be looking at ... today.
Stating the organization	I'd like to start by looking at ... This will be followed by ... Finally, I will consider ... There will be three sections in today's talk ...
Introducing a part	Let's begin with ... Now let's turn to ... I'd like to now examine ... Firstly, ...
Summarizing a part	In a nutshell, we've ... So far, I have mentioned ... Therefore, what I've looked at so far is ...
Moving to another part	Secondly, I will discuss ... I'd like to move on to ... Turning now to the idea of ...
Concluding	In conclusion, we can see that ... The purpose of this talk was to ... To sum up, we have seen that ... Finally, let's recap the main points.

Other common kinds of signposting language

Cause	due to, because of
Effect	as a result, therefore, so
Explanation	such as, for example, specifically
Comparison	similarly, in the same way, like
Contrast	while, on the other hand, but
Emphasis	most/more importantly, a key factor, it must be stressed
Adding a related point	as well as, in addition, also, furthermore

Challenges / difficulties

Some speakers may not include clear signposts, which can make them much more difficult to follow. It is also easy to miss a signal word or phrase during a long talk. The more signposting language you are familiar with, the more you will be able to follow what is being said and identify what is important to note.

How can I develop this skill?

Every talk you attend will hopefully help you improve your ability to follow the speaker, but nowadays lectures are also often put online for you to access. Therefore, you can practise by listening to these recorded versions several times, if necessary, to improve your ability to identify signposting language.

Learning outcome

- You will be able to predict what you are going to hear by recognizing the speaker's signposting language. This will also improve your note-taking ability.
- Knowing how speakers signal what they are saying will also help your understanding in all spoken interactions.

Theory to practice

- 1** ▶ **01 Listen to part of a lecture and note down any signposting language you hear.**

- 2** **Now read the transcript and check. Did you get all of them?**

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk to you about health at work. Did you know that last year, there were 630,000 injuries at work? It's a big problem, isn't it, both for employers and for employees? I was surprised by that number, and that's why today I'm going to talk about two things: firstly, how to avoid accidents, and secondly, what to do if there is one. I'm also happy to take any of your questions, but we've got a lot to get through, so let's do that at the end of my talk. OK? Anyway, starting with avoiding accidents ...

- 3** **Why is each signposting phrase used? Look back at the categories in the Key features section.**

Ways to get more practice

As discussed, watching a pre-recorded talk/lecture can allow you to further practise recognizing signposting. Try to listen for how a talk follows the structure outlined in the introduction, and how the summing up relates back to what was said.