

Basics

A summary of something you have heard will aim to record the basic message. It will note the important ideas briefly but accurately. If it is written well, you will be able to read it again later to remind yourself what you heard.

The academic context

When you are studying, there are three main reasons for needing to summarize what you have been listening to. Firstly, it may be an academic exercise – for example, your tutor may ask you to make a summary of a lecture. Secondly, there are academic exams which ask for listening material to be summarized. Lastly, you will want to condense your notes from lectures to use them for assignments, exams, etc.

Key features

Before listening

- Think about what you expect to hear. If it's a lecture, read any information available beforehand. If you're listening during a test or exam, read the question carefully and highlight all keywords which give you an indication of what to expect.

Making notes while listening

- Take notes selectively – focus on key verbs and nouns to ensure you have correctly understood the main concepts.
- You may prefer to write down nearly everything you hear, and then sort out what is important afterwards. However, this method may cause you to miss important information. Through trial and error, find a way to write notes that suits you. Try using abbreviations and symbols.
- Structure your notes so that it is easy to distinguish main information from supplementary information. For example: the main points could be highlighted in a different colour, or supplementary information could be indented.
- Keep anecdotes and examples to a minimum – they should only be included if they are important.

Writing your summary

- If you are writing a summary with a word limit, you will normally get higher marks by writing near to the upper limit because you have more scope to include everything needed.
- Some exams ask you to summarize a listening text by stating its purpose. In that case, ensure you only summarize the information that actually explains that purpose.
- Discard any unimportant data or examples.
- Use paraphrasing and synonyms, but make sure you retain any essential specialized vocabulary.
- Alter grammatical structures: change the passive voice to the active, or vice versa; use verb forms of nouns; etc.
- Alter how the talk was structured: break down long sentences into shorter ones, combine short ones, or express ideas in a different way. For example, turn a comparison into a contrast.
- Shorten everything you can: make a complex sentence simple, turn a sentence into a phrase, or shorten a phrase into a single word.
- Once you have done your cutting and reworking, join connected information together in sentences. Use linking words.
- Finally, reread the summary and check you have made the purpose clear and that the meaning is true to the original. A summary should be written in your personal style, with good spelling and grammar.

Challenges / difficulties

Summarizing a listening text takes practice. If it is a lecture, you may find you get used to the style of the lecturer and how to cope with summarizing what they say. Exams which ask you to summarize listening can be tackled more easily once you have practised doing them a few times.


How can I develop this skill?

Once again, the key is practice. Listen to a news feature, a podcast or a recorded talk and see if you can summarize what you heard.

Learning outcome

- You will have the necessary tools to deal with summarizing a listening text.
- You will improve your understanding of spoken English, as you will be more aware of how to grasp main ideas.

Theory to practice

- 1**  **01** Listen to a lecture about alternative medicine. Make a few notes to explain what it is, including several examples.

- 2**  **01** Listen again and make notes in the table about advantages and disadvantages of alternative medicine.

Alternative medicine	
Advantages	Disadvantages

- 3** Write a summary of 100 words or less about the advantages and disadvantages of alternative medicine.

- 4** If you were writing a summary to revise for an exam, is there anything else you would include from the lecture?

Ways to get more practice

Working with a fellow student is always beneficial. Listen to the same talk and both summarize the main points individually. Then compare your summaries. Discuss the most important points and any differences in what you wrote.