

The Listening section can seem like one of the most intimidating sections on the TOEFL. The tasks in the Listening section require you to sort through lectures and conversations that are filled with distracting pauses and brief digressions—a very frustrating experience, but a very realistic scenario. Don't be discouraged! The Listening section does follow some common patterns. The key to getting a good score is to find these patterns; this chapter is going to teach you how to do exactly that.

## LISTENING ON THE TOEFL

In this section, you'll be asked to listen to *lectures* and *conversations*. These listening tasks will have a definite structure, which is similar to the reading passages we just studied. There will be an introduction, supporting details or examples, and a conclusion.

Let's take a closer look at the structure of these lectures and conversations.

In a *lecture*, you can expect to hear the following:

1. **Opening:** The teacher or professor will greet the class and announce the topic of the lecture.
2. **Purpose of the lecture:** After stating the topic, the speaker will usually mention the focus of this particular lecture.
3. **Details and/or examples:** The lecture will usually include several supporting details and/or examples.
4. **Conclusion:** Conclusions in the lectures will not always be obvious. Some lectures or talks will end rather abruptly.

Additionally, an academic lecture or talk on the TOEFL is also likely to contain:

5. **Questions and/or comments:** During the lecture, a student will often ask a question or make a comment. The answers to these questions typically reinforce the speaker's purpose.

In a *conversation*, you can expect to hear the following:

1. **Greeting:** The two people talking will first exchange greetings.
2. **Statement of problem/issue:** Conversations on the TOEFL typically revolve around a problem or an issue faced by one of the speakers.
3. **Response:** After the problem or issue is raised, one of the speakers will respond, usually by making a suggestion to the other.
4. **Resolution:** The conversation will end with some sort of closing or resolution to the problem.

Your challenge in the Listening section is similar to your challenge in the Reading section of the TOEFL. When listening to a conversation or lecture, you need to do the following:

1. Identify *what* the topic is.
2. Figure out *why* the topic is being addressed.
3. Note the supporting *examples*.

You've practiced identifying these parts in the previous chapter. Now the challenge is to apply what you've learned to the Listening section. There are some things, however, that make the listening tasks especially difficult.

## CHALLENGES IN THE LISTENING SECTION

In the Speaking and Writing sections (which you'll learn about as you move through this book), you will be required to listen to lectures and respond, just like you will in the Listening section. However, there is a difference between the tasks in other sections and those in the Listening section.

The difference is that the tasks in the Listening section have intentional distractions. These distractions are pauses, interruptions, and interjections that disrupt the flow of the speaker's talk. Interestingly, if you were to respond on the Speaking section in the same way the speakers talk on the Listening section, you would receive a fairly low score.

For example, you may hear something like the three brief statements that follow, which include common distractions (try reading them aloud, or ask a friend to read them to you).

"Okay, so, uh...today we're going to discuss the hunting practices of the umm...Trobriand Islanders. As you remember, we uh...last week, last week we talked about their social structure, now we're moving into their day-to-day activities."

"So let's take our example of...what did we say? Right, our example is the proposed flat tax rate. Now this example isn't a perfect one because, well...it's only a hypothetical example, but it'll do for this discussion."

"Therefore—and this is an important point—the New Historicism Movement—didn't um, didn't come out of nowhere. It was a product of its time. Okay?"

Another characteristic that makes the Listening section different from the others is that you will have to follow conversations between multiple speakers. It can be difficult to identify the purpose or the supporting details of a conversation when the speaker changes.

## TAKING NOTES

You are allowed to take notes on the TOEFL. Of course, you must balance your note-taking with your ability to comprehend the speech or lecture. A common mistake is to try to write too much; this often causes you to miss hearing some important information. Therefore, keep your note-taking to a minimum and focus only on major points.

Here's a suggestion on how to organize your notes.

- I. What? \_\_\_\_\_
- II. Why? \_\_\_\_\_
- III. Reasons/examples \_\_\_\_\_
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
- IV. Conclusion \_\_\_\_\_

Whether or not you take notes, you will need to listen actively to do well on this part of the TOEFL.

## ACTIVE LISTENING

*Active listening* strategies are similar to the *active reading* strategies on which we worked in the previous chapter, Core Concept: Reading. Of course, active listening is more difficult than active reading. However, by familiarizing yourself with the overall structure of the lectures and conversations, you'll have an easier time understanding the main points.

When listening actively, pay attention to the following:

1. **Purpose:** The speaker will usually state the purpose of the lecture or conversation within the first few lines of the talk.
2. **Reasons/examples:** The rest of the conversation or lecture will contain reasons or examples related to the purpose.

The next sections provide you with some practice in listening actively to lectures and conversations. Let's start with lectures.

## Listening to Lectures

Track 1 on the CD that accompanies this book is a lecture in a sociology class. As you listen to the lecture, try to identify the purpose and the reasons or examples. How is this lecture similar to the reading passages we've looked at? How is it different?



Play Track 1 on the accompanying CD. A transcript of the lecture can be found on page 99.

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Examples: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Lecture Analysis

Lectures typically follow the format of reading passages. The speaker will provide an introduction, supporting reasons and examples, and some sort of conclusion. Of course, as you're listening to the lecture, you won't be aware of when a paragraph ends, but you should still know what to expect based on the part of the lecture to which you're listening.

Here's the introduction of the lecture, broken down piece by piece.

- (1) Okay, class, let's get started. (2) Today, um, today we're going to talk about the ah...structural functionalist theory in sociology. (3) You guys remember last week we discussed the interactionist perspective, right? (4) Now that theory, the interactionist theory, focused on how people get along with one another and, uh, the way that interactions um...create behaviors.

Now, let's analyze what's going on in this first part of the introduction.

1. **Introduction.** On the TOEFL, the lectures and conversations usually start with a greeting of some sort. This greeting is not important to the lecture.
2. **Topic.** At some point early in the lecture, the professor will probably state what the class is going to talk about "today," or "in this class." This is very important. Note the topic on your scrap paper.
3. **Background.** Usually, the professor will refer to a prior lecture or topic. The professor will state that the class talked about this topic "last time," "last class," or something along those lines. This information may be important to the lecture or it may be a distraction; it depends on what the purpose of the lecture is.
4. **More background.** This line provides more background information.

Here's the second part of the introduction.

(1) This theory...the structural functionalist theory...I'm just going to call it the functionalist theory...is very different. (2) Now, we'll talk about the historical context of this theory a little bit later, (3) but first I would like to just...um, go over the main tenets of the theory.

Let's analyze what's going on in this second part of the introduction.

1. **Transition:** Speeches and lectures tend to have more transitions. These transitions don't add any new information.
2. **Digression:** You will also notice a digression (an off-topic comment) or two during the lectures. Usually, the professor will refer to something that will be "discussed later" or "at another time." Sometimes the professor will say, "I'm not going to get into this now." This information is unimportant.
3. **Purpose:** Listen for the statement of purpose early on in the lecture. If you figure out the purpose, write it down on your scrap paper.

This is the next part of the lecture.

(1) The basic view of functionalism is that our behaviors and actions can be best explained with...explained by the role...or function, if you will...that they perform for the society as a whole. (2) Now, that may be a little vague. (3) What do I mean by that? (4) Well, let's look at some different behaviors and, uh, see how a functionalist would explain them.

Let's analyze what's happening in this part of the lecture.

1. **Definition/explanation:** The purpose of many of the lectures is to define or explain a term.
- 2., 3. **Digression:** Both lines 2 and 3 don't add anything to the lecture. As you're listening, try to focus on the topic and the examples given to support/explain it.
4. **Transition:** Here's another transition. Note how the speaker is about to discuss examples. Typically, the lecturer will say something such as, "Now, let's look at..." or "Now, I want to talk about..." These words let you know that examples are coming.

Here's the next section.

(1) A good example would be the, uh, drug use. (2) A functionalist wouldn't really um...judge a drug user as a deviant, a bad person. Instead, the functionalist would try to ah...figure out what role the drug user, the person, fills in society. (3) This seems a little strange at first but bear with me. (4) Think about what role a drug user fills in society. (5) You may automatically think that the role, um, the role is always negative—crime, the cost of treatment, maybe more jails—but the functionalist tries to see the positives as well.

And here's the analysis of this section.

1. **Example:** Once the lecturer begins discussing examples, the structure is very similar to a reading passage. There will be an example followed by specific details.
2. **Detail:** Many of the questions will ask about details, so try to note some of them.
- 3., 4. **Digression:** These two lines address the class. They emphasize the lecturer's example, but they are relatively unimportant.
5. **Detail:** This is similar to line 2. Don't try to write down or memorize everything the lecturer says. You won't have time.

Here is the next part of the lecture.

(1) I bet you're thinking that drug use doesn't have too many positives, right? (2) Well, here's what a functionalist would say. (3) While a drug user may be harming himself or herself, to be fair, he is also benefiting society. Having drug users means we need to have more police, which means obviously, more jobs.

And also...if you think about it...more doctors, nurses, and social workers. Even drug counselors. All these people would be out of work, probably, if we didn't have a drug problem. Let's keep going... without drug users, we wouldn't need the entire Drug Enforcement Agency, that bureau employs thousands of people, you know, and there's also the border patrol, customs agents, and so on, and so on.

And here's what's happening in this section.

1. **Transition:** This line acts as a bridge from one paragraph (which describes negative factors) to the next sentences (which describe positive factors).
2. **Detail:** This line brings the discussion back to the topic.
3. **Detail:** The rest of the lines all give details about the topic. Again, you can't possibly note every single part, so just try to note down one or two important points.

Finally, here is the last part of the lecture.

(1) So I think our example has given you a pretty good idea of how a functionalist views behaviors. (2) Again, the important thing is that they don't really judge behaviors as good or bad...they only view them based on their role or function in society.

And I think we can probably guess then, that to a functionalist, all behaviors...no matter how good or bad you may think they are... are necessary to society. (3) It's really a, uh, pretty interesting viewpoint, if you think about it.