

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

*Academic Listening*

*Part 3 - How lectures are organised*



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*This programme was first broadcast in 2001.*

*This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript of the programme.*

ANNOUNCER:

It's time for **Academic Listening** - a series for students at English-speaking universities. Join Susan Fearn - and members of the World Service class of 2001 - for more on the art of understanding a lecture.

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**Susan:** Today, we'll continue to look at a range of techniques to make listening easier, and we've also got an exercise to help develop your listening skills.

**CLIP: Student**

It's easy when you listen to something very well structured. But when you go to lectures, people generally prefer to talk about the subject. They're not preparing the structure of their English, basically - then, it's difficult.

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**Susan:** In the last programme we thought about the purpose of lectures and suggested that understanding the aim of a lecture helps you to decide where to focus your attention. This is a useful skill because you can't concentrate on everything at

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once. We also said that it's important to recognise how speakers organise their material.

### **CLIP: Simon Williams**

Typically things are in three parts.

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**Susan:** Simon Williams teaches English in the Language Centre at University College London.

### **CLIP: Simon Williams**

There's a kind of introduction, giving the purpose and background to the topic and plan of lecture. The body of the lecture in which examples given, ideas outlined and contrasted. Then a conclusion in which the various ideas are evaluated and perhaps the lecturer gives their own opinion.

**Susan:** According to Simon Williams, most lectures follow a simple structure: they have a beginning, middle, and an end. Of these, the first section - the introduction - is arguably the most important. This is because it's where the speaker sets the scene and outlines the content of their talk. There may be a series of announcements before and after the main content of the lecture.

### **CLIP: Simon Williams**

Now around that structure – let's remember it's a real event with people involved. So there will probably be some kind of welcome, announcements, jokes, and people settle down. And at the end, some closing remarks, some management talk in which lecturer refers to the next meeting and gives some reading to be done, advice on how to use notes for further work..

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**Susan:** Ana from Brazil is studying architecture at University College London. She's familiar with this kind of structure, and agrees that the introduction provides useful clues to identify the speaker's particular standpoint and how they intend to develop the topic during the lecture.

**CLIP: Ana**

They used to give an introduction of their theoretical background and how they are managing to think and to conceptualise the problems they are discussing and then they usually show a couple of examples, and then they just go to a conclusion which is mainly theoretical or the way people are occupying the space and helping the audience to understand what they are talking about and what the points are.

**Susan:** It's a good idea, then, to assume that your lecturer will organise their talk in this way. Simon Williams says it's also useful to think about the content and structure of the lecture from another point of view. He points out that most lecturers approach their material in one of three ways. In the first, the lecturer presents a sequence of events in the order of happening.

**CLIP: Simon Williams**

Most familiar to all our listeners will be a chronological approach – rather like biography, or autobiography. It is starting early in time and finishing late. Perhaps telling someone's life story. In the same way, describing a process - how something works or how experiment is conducted - also follows a chronological order – order through time. We intuitively recognise that when reading or listening, and it's reassuring – we can anticipate what's going to come next.

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**Susan:** Secondly, Simon Williams refers to the type of lecture where speakers look at different aspects of a topic, or present a number of theories about it.

**CLIP: Simon Williams**

There might be a division of ideas; a kind of matrix. The lecturer might say: “I’m going to talk about three things this morning: first, a country’s tourism, then its natural resources, then its service industry.” So we know we're going to have three main sections.

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**Susan:** A third approach is to discuss a situation and its associated problems.

**CLIP: Simon Williams**

Another very common way of organising texts – both spoken and written – is the situation, problem, solution and evaluation format. A situation, such as the global spread of the English language, is outlined. Then a problem is identified, such as the disappearance of smaller languages. Then a solution is offered, e.g. to introduce legislation against the extensive use of English. And finally; finally an evaluation – some kind of assessment of this solution. This offers a new problem and the next step is to offer more refined solution, and so on.

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**Susan:** Now, here’s a chance for you to do some listening practice. We’ll play you extracts from two lectures. In both cases, you’ll hear the introduction, and I’d like you, quite simply, to try to recognise what approach the lecturer is taking. The first lecture is about politics in Britain. How does the speaker structure her talk?

**CLIP: Lecturer**

OK Good afternoon everybody. Today I'm going to lecture to you about politics in the UK or the British system of Government. Now Parliament in the UK actually has three parts. First of all, we have the Queen or the monarch, Queen Elizabeth, so that's one part. Secondly we have the House of Lords, and thirdly we have the House of Commons, so those three together make up Parliament. The Queen, the House of Lords, the House of Commons.

OK, first of all today I want to talk about the role of the monarch, or the role of the Queen. In the UK we have what's called a constitutional monarchy...

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**Susan:** The structure there is what Simon Williams calls division of ideas. The speaker intends to divide her talk into **three** sections, considering the roles firstly of the queen, then of the House of Lords and finally of the House of Commons.

Now, here's part of another lecture about urbanisation, where countryside areas become more like towns. Which approach does the lecturer take; chronological, division of ideas, or situation, problem, solution, evaluation?

**CLIP: Lecturer**

Today I want to discuss problems of urbanisation. In particular, I want to talk about those problems which are peculiar to developing economies and to discuss three possible policies which, um, could be used to control or to stem uncontrolled urbanisation in developing countries.

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**Susan:** Well, the answer was to be found in the very first sentence ... the speaker intends to discuss the problems of the situation she calls "urbanisation", and she intends to comment on three possible solutions to the problem. This is an example of the classic format: situation, problem, solution and evaluation.

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So, as you see, in both cases, the speaker outlines the structure of their talk and the approach she intends to take. Knowing this in advance is useful for two reasons. It will help you to follow the different sections of the lecture; and, importantly, to identify the speaker's key points. Simon Williams again.

**CLIP: Simon Williams**

Recognising structures will help the student to orientate themselves, and to notice when to take down ideas, and how to organise their notes. Recognising the *type* of lecture – whether chronological; division of ideas; or situation, problem, solution, evaluation – is really useful in helping you to predict content and the way it's organised, the kind of content that's going to come up.

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**Susan:** Ana, our student from Brazil, has another tip on how to find your way around a lecture.

**CLIP: Ana**

Well I think most of the time when the lecture is finishing, the 'in conclusion', or these sorts of markers are going to appear. They can use these sorts of words that can lead you to the introduction, and then to the main points, and then to the conclusion. You can understand when it's the end of the introduction, when it's the end of the main points and when the conclusion is coming.

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**Susan:** Last time we heard about a number of ways in which speakers guide listeners through their talks. They can do this through their intonation and stress; and by using a number of self-conscious “marker phrases” which are like mini-announcements or signposts within the lecture. These are important clues for they key points that you might want to note down.

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### **CLIP: Simon Williams**

To make it easier for yourself when listening to lectures, if you don't want to write down everything, listen out for markers – little signals that a lecturer uses to show they're reaching a key point, or when they're about to begin a new section. Again, like signposts on a journey, they help you to know where you are, what direction you're going in. Markers might be “right”, “OK”, “the next thing I want to turn to”, and it's the information after those markers that you need to take down. That'll be the important information that signals a new topic area.

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ANNOUNCER:

And that brings us to the end of today's programme, in which we've focused on the structure of lectures. We've discovered that knowing what the lecturer is going to talk about, knowing when they're moving from one point to the next and when they're starting the individual sections of their lecture will help you understand it better.

In the next programme we'll focus more closely on the important, introductory section of a lecture.