

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Academic Listening

Part 4 - Lectures: the introduction



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 and people who want to improve their listening skills. The series is presented by Susan Fearn.

Susan: You're studying architecture.

It's Monday afternoon – time for your weekly lecture with the Professor.

You find a seat at the front of the lecture theatre, and silence falls.

You know the *introduction* of any lecture contains important clues about what's to come, so you pay careful attention as the Professor begins.

CLIP: Professor

Good afternoon. Today's session is the first of a series of three lectures on "Urban Planning". In this first lecture we'll look at the important question of **infrastructure** when planning any town or city; and then in the next two sessions we'll turn our attention respectively to: **public building requirements** and issues surrounding **industry**.

Now, infrastructure has been defined as 'the structure of a country'...

Susan: In the last programme, we saw that lectures tend to have a simple structure with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Of these, we argued that the first section, the introduction, is crucial because this is where the speaker sets the scene and outlines the content of their talk

CLIP: Simon Williams

The introduction's so important because it gives the students signals of how to interpret what's going to come up.

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

CLIP: Simon Williams

It's going to put the lecture and those following it into context, e.g. in a series on urban planning the first lecture might be on infrastructure: transportation, power etc; the second one on public buildings; the third one on industry ... so the student has an overview and gets the relation from week to week between the content of a lecture and the series as a whole.

Susan: The first part of a lecture has a number of functions. Speakers use the introduction to set the lecture in context: in terms of what's gone before and what's coming later in the series. They may also indicate the relative importance of today's topic within the subject area as a whole. Now, we've said before that students can prepare for a lecture by reading through the course outline and reflecting on the title of the lecture. The introduction is a good opportunity to start matching your predictions with

reality.

Simon Williams advises students to listen particularly for clues on how the lecture will be organised.

CLIP: Simon Williams

The first section is important for alerting students how many parts a lecture is going to contain.

There usually an introduction, a conclusion, and the crucial part is to know how many sections there are in the middle... That's very important in helping students to revise or to use their notes.

Susan: In the introduction you'll also find details about the specific content of today's lecture, and how the speaker intends to approach the subject. There are often other helpful elements to be found.

CLIP: Simon Williams

The sort of ingredients you might find in the introduction – apart from the lecturer giving an idea of the organisation so the student knows when different sections are finishing and starting – perhaps the definitions of key terms, the scope of the lecture, how much work students will have to do by themselves after the lecture is over. And perhaps why the lecturer is interested – it's often stimulating to know why people are enthusiastic about a subject, and what personal relationship they've got with it; and perhaps why the students should be interested themselves – e.g. it's topical or examinable.

Susan: Well, bearing Simon Williams' advice in mind, let's return to our lecture on urban planning. Listen again to the professor's introduction and focus on the vital information it contains – some of which you may have missed the first time, perhaps because you weren't expecting it.

Remember: a good student will be looking for answers to questions like these:

What's the context of today's lecture?

How is the speaker going to organise his talk? How many sections will there be, what sort of approach is he going to take?

How does the speaker define any key terms? How does he plan to limit the scope of his talk so he can finish on time?

Finally, why is the professor doing this talk today? Does he have a particular interest in the subject, for example? Does he think it's something I need to know for an exam or a tutorial discussion?

CLIP: Professor

Good afternoon. Today's session is the first of a series of three lectures on "Urban Planning". In this first lecture we'll look at the important question of **infrastructure** when planning any town or city; and then in the next two sessions we'll turn our attention respectively to: **public building requirements** and issues surrounding **industry**.

Now, infrastructure has been defined as 'the structure of a country, society or organisation which helps it to function effectively'.

And I'll be using the term specifically today to highlight three important areas:

roads and transport;

essential services such as power and water;

and communication networks such as telephones, cable television and so on.

By the way, I'll be drawing throughout this lecture on my recent article: "Housing in Crisis: a planner's problem – the architect's solution". And you might like to take a look at that more closely before you start working on your "Design a City" Project next month. You'll find some ideas for further reading and some pointers on the kind of approach to take. I've got copies of that article to give at the end of the session.

OK ... Now, traditionally towns and cities have grown up at crossroads...

Susan: If, as a student, you're aware that lecturers use their introduction to indicate the plan or organisation of a talk, and to identify the key points they'll cover, you can use this information to help with the difficult but important task of taking notes. Christine Reeves teaches at Bell Norwich, a language school in the East of England.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

I think one of the main problems is the really difficult skill of listening for the the main points, understanding the main points and processing the main points and actually taking notes at the same time. This is definitely what the students have expressed most difficulty in to me - as a teacher.

Susan: Even though lectures play a key role in university teaching, many students find that they're the most daunting aspect of university life. This is often because they find it difficult to listen and take effective notes at the same time. So what advice can we offer? Simon Williams once again.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Good note-taking technique is a matter of confidence. It's no good trying to write down everything because you won't then understand what's important and what can be left out. What is important is to understand how things fit together. So it's trying to keep a balance between understanding and having detail – in other words, knowing what the general ideas are and having concrete examples to back up those ideas.

You don't need to keep a complete record – otherwise take in a tape recorder. Partly it's a matter of digesting what's being said, of understanding the main points and also, a revision aid. It's going to be useful to reconstitute the information into essays and other texts, to manipulate this material: either for assessment purposes – essays or exams - or formulating a list of

questions you want to put to the lecturer or tutor in future meetings. This might help you in future study directions.

Susan: When you read a book you can stop and start as you please. You can re-read sentences and reflect before moving on. This isn't possible in a lecture. Unless you have access to a recording of the lecture, you only have one chance to hear it. It's physically impossible to write down every word – so it's important to be brief and to select very carefully what you decide to include in your notes. That's why we've spent some time focusing on how to recognise the most important information in the lecture by looking for clues particularly in the outline in the introduction. OK – so that's the theory – that's what the teachers say. But what about our WS class members? What advice do our students have to offer?

CLIP: Students

During the lecture I used to take a lot of notes - a lot of the time, although it might seem a bit funny, I'd write down exactly what the tutor said so I could go back and if you didn't understand there was a way . At the beginning I used to write as much as I could.

When you go to a lecture and the lecturer is speaking and you have time to make all the notes you want, then at first I used to make notes very strictly summarising the points, and then with time I started to be more confident and I could make notes about the relations between what he was talking about to my subject.

Obviously I try and write as few [*notes*] as possible... A problem is that if you try to take notes you can lose concentration and maybe you can write but when you try and read again later it won't make sense. So I tried to use specific words to make sense of the lecture.

Susan: Well, there are almost as many different styles of note-taking as there are students! Some try to focus only on the key points, as we've been suggesting. Others feel more secure if they write down as much as they can - in the early days at least. Well, how does Simon Williams respond to that?

CLIP: Simon Williams

It's probably important to do whatever is your personal style – you can't change overnight. So if you like to take down everything, write down all the details, and review it afterwards. It's important to review as soon as possible and then use highlighters, marker pens to underline, to make connections, to try to identify really important points. So later, when you're revising, you can take out those points, either for exams or writing essays.

ANNOUNCER:

And that brings us to the end of this edition of Academic Listening, in which we've focused on the important first section of a lecture: the introduction ... and in which we've heard some advice on effective note-taking.