

Strengthening Listening Comprehension

How can I work to best understand lectures and discussions?

- ***Listen for 10-15 minutes/day to a radio or TV program in English (CBC programs are good).*** You can use Reading eWriting to write to me about what you listen to or watch. Also, thinking critically about what you're listening to will help you to understand material and remember it. Question what you hear, and make connections with what you already know. Listen actively, not passively.
- ***Avoid trying to tape-record and translate lectures.*** This is equivalent to reading line by line and looking up every word you don't know. There simply isn't enough time, and you will most likely become frustrated and end up missing large portions of the work. Instead, apply good listening strategies to get as much as possible from the lectures. At the same time, work steadily to improve your vocabulary and comprehension. Take a "global" view of your own progress. If you do record, use it to review just selected portions of the lecture.
- ***Be aware of common transitions and signals in speech.*** Listen for possible previews in lectures. Also listen for the transitional and connecting words and phrases. These signal relationships between ideas as well as pointing to the overall organization of the lecture.
- ***Listen for patterns to expect in a particular professor's lectures.*** Does this professor always or often begin by referring back to previous material? Does he/she tend to discuss examples that are not from the readings but that refer back to important theoretical concepts? Are there "jumps" from one topic to another, then back again? Does he/she proceed in a linear way, one idea building clearly on the next, or does this person's mind work in a non-linear way, approaching a topic from a number of different angles during the lecture? Whatever the pattern, if you can learn what it is and expect it, your comprehension will be increased.
- ***Keep in mind that not all important course material will be in lecture notes or on PowerPoint slides.*** Even if the professor posts notes or slides on the course website, there may be important material that is only spoken in the lecture. Professors teach in different ways; some do not provide notes or slides. If you suspect you may have missed something important, ask another student or the TA.
- ***Remember that you can ask for clarification on assignments.*** Naturally, you can't ask for clarification of large portions of material. However, you can ask a TA for clarification of some specific course concepts during a tutorial. It is also quite common for students, even native speakers, to request clarification on assignment procedures and expectations. Come to the Writing Centre even before you begin an assignment, to clarify what you need to do.

- ***Be aware that background information may be needed to understand lectures as well as readings.*** During the lecture, note down unfamiliar terms that seem important or are repeated, and look them up later. Sometimes you may have difficulty not because of the language but because of an historical or cultural reference—or even because of irony or humour.
- ***Making friends is a priority.*** Be as friendly and outgoing as possible with the classmates sitting near you or with you in a tutorial—try to make friends in every class. This is one of the most important factors in your satisfaction with university, and it helps tremendously with learning the language. Friends in each class can also provide an important network: you can ask them questions, and you can also help them out when they don't understand or have missed a lecture, etc. The better your relationships with others, the more comfortable you will feel at U of T, and this will aid in listening comprehension.
- ***Borrowing a classmate's lecture notes can be helpful.*** Be careful about whose notes you borrow—make sure it is a student who does understand the material.
- ***Ask focused questions.*** If you are consulting with a professor or TA, ask a specific question. The answer will then be more focused and easier to understand.
- ***Improve your knowledge of colloquial (everyday) English.*** This is important, even for following academic lectures and discussions. The connections between ideas may often be expressed in colloquial, rather than very formal, language. Listening to radio or TV as well as talking with people whenever possible will help with this. Watching movies or even brief You Tube videos is also useful. Write down new words and expressions to look up later.
- ***Listen in a receptive, relaxed frame of mind.*** Often, listening in a more relaxed way is more productive than a tense straining to catch every word. Don't focus on understanding every word or even every sentence; try to catch the most important ideas. This is especially true when people are speaking quickly.
- ***“Reflect back” what you think a person has just said.*** In conversations, check that you have understood correctly by reflecting back what you think a person has just said (e.g. “So your view is that A is B—is that correct?”)
- ***Keep up with course readings.*** Keeping up with the reading is a form of “previewing” for lectures. You can also go over lecture notes or PowerPoint slides. You are more likely to “hear” words you already know.