3 Listening Section

Read this chapter to learn

- The 8 types of TOEFL iBT Listening questions
- How to recognize each Listening question type
- Tips for answering each Listening question type
- Strategies for preparing for the Listening section

In the TOEFL iBT Listening section you will listen to four to six lectures and two to three conversations. There will be six questions per lecture and five questions per conversation. You will have a total of 60 to 90 minutes to answer all of the Listening questions.

Listening Materials

There are two types of Listening materials on the TOEFL iBT test, conversations and lectures. Both are based on the actual speech that is used in North American colleges and universities.

Each lecture or conversation is 3–6 minutes long and, as far as possible, represents authentic academic language. For example, a professor giving a lecture may digress somewhat from the main topic, interactions between students and the professor can be extensive, and explanations of content can be elaborate. Features of oral language such as false starts, misspeaks with self-corrections, and repetitions are included. The speakers who record the texts are encouraged to use their own speech patterns (for example, with pauses and hesitations), as long as they preserve the content of the text. You should take notes during the lectures and conversations. This material is not meant to test your memory.

Conversations

There are two types of conversations in the Listening section:

- office hours
- service encounters

These conversations are typical of those that occur on North American university campuses. Office hours conversations are interactions that take place in a professor's office. The content may be academic or related to course requirements. For example, in an office conversation a student could request an extension on a due date (nonacademic content), or a student could ask for clarification about

the content of a lecture (academic content). Service encounters are interactions that take place on a university campus and have nonacademic content. Examples include inquiring about a payment for housing and registering for class. Each conversation is followed by five questions.

Lectures

Lectures in the Listening section represent the kind of language used when professors teach in a classroom. The lecture excerpt may include just a professor speaking, a student asking the professor a question, or the professor asking the students a question and calling on one student for a response. Each lecture is approximately 5 minutes in length and is followed by six questions.

The content of the lectures reflects the content that is presented in introductory-level academic settings. Lecture topics cover a broad range of subjects. You will not be expected to have any prior knowledge of the subject matter. All the information you need to answer the questions will be contained in the lecture. The lists below are provided to give you an idea of the topics that typically appear in the Listening section. In general these topics are divided into four major categories:

- Arts
- Life Science
- Physical Science
- Social Science

Arts lectures may be on topics such as:

- Architecture
- Industrial design/art
- City planning
- Crafts (weaving, knitting, fabrics, furniture, carving, mosaics, ceramics, folk and tribal art)
- Cave/rock art
- Music and music history
- Photography
- Literature and authors
- Books, newspapers, magazines, journals

Life Science lectures may be on topics such as:

- Extinction of or conservation efforts for animals and plants
- Fish and other aquatic organisms
- Bacteria and other one-celled organisms
- Viruses
- Medical techniques
- Public health
- Physiology of sensory organs
- Biochemistry
- Animal behavior (migration, food foraging, defenses)

- Habitats and the adaptation of animals and plants to them
- Nutrition and its impact on the body
- Animal communication

Physical Science lectures may be on topics such as:

- Weather and atmosphere
- Oceanography
- Glaciers, glacial landforms, ice ages
- Deserts and other extreme environments
- Pollution, alternative energy, environmental policy
- Other planets' atmospheres
- Astronomy and cosmology
- Properties of light, optics
- Properties of sound
- Electromagnetic radiation
- Particle physics
- Technology of TV, radio, radar
- Chemistry of inorganic things
- Computer science
- Seismology (plate structure, earthquakes, tectonics, continental drift, structure of volcanoes)

Social Science lectures may be on topics such as:

- Anthropology of nonindustrialized civilizations
- Early writing systems
- Historical linguistics
- Business, management, marketing, accounting
- TV/radio as mass communication
- Social behavior of groups, community dynamics, communal behavior
- Child development
- Education
- Modern history (including the history of urbanization and industrialization and their economic and social effects)

Listening Questions

Most of the Listening questions that follow the lectures and conversations are traditional multiple-choice questions with four answer choices and a single correct answer. There are, however, some other types of questions:

- multiple-choice questions with more than one correct answer (for example, two answers out of four choices or three answers out of five choices)
- questions that require you to put in order events or steps in a process
- questions that require you to match objects or text to categories in a table

Some questions replay a part of the lecture or conversation. You will then be asked a multiple-choice question about what you have just heard.

There are eight types of questions in the Listening section. These types are divided into three categories as follows:

TOEFL Listening Question Types

Basic Comprehension questions
1. Gist-content
2. Gist-purpose
3. Detail

Pragmatic Understanding questions
4. Understanding the Function of What Is Said
5. Understanding the Speaker's Attitude

Connecting Information questions
6. Understanding Organization
7. Connecting Content
8. Making Inferences

The following sections will explain each of these question types. You will find out how to recognize each type and see examples of each type with explanations. You will also find tips that can help you answer each Listening question type.

Basic Comprehension Questions

Basic comprehension of the lecture or conversation is tested in three ways: with Gist-content, Gist-purpose, and Detail questions.

Type 1: Gist-content Questions

Understanding the *gist* of a lecture or conversation means understanding the general topic or main idea. The gist of the lecture or conversation may be expressed explicitly or implicitly. Questions that test understanding the gist of a lecture or converation may require you to generalize or synthesize information from what you hear.

How to Recognize Gist-content Questions

Gist-content questions are typically phrased as follows:

- What problem does the man have?
- What are the speakers mainly discussing?
- What is the main topic of the lecture?
- What is the lecture mainly about?
- What aspect of X does the professor mainly discuss?

Tips for Gist-content Questions

- Gist-content questions ask about the *overall* content of the lecture or converation. Eliminate choices that refer to only small portions of what you just listened to.
- Use your notes. Decide what overall theme ties the details in your notes together. Choose the answer that comes closest to describing this overall theme.

Example Excerpt from a lecture:

Professor

. . . So the Earth's surface is made up of these huge segments, these tectonic plates. And these plates move, right? But how can, uh, motion of plates, do you think, influence climate on the Earth? Again, all of you probably read this section in the book, I hope, but, uh, uh, how—how can just motion of the plates impact the climate?

. . . when a plate moves, if there's landmass on the plate, then the landmass moves too, okay? That's why continents shift their positions, because the plates they're on move. So as a landmass moves away from the equator, its climate would get colder. So, right now we have a continent—the landmass Antarctica—that's on a pole.

So that's dramatically influencing the climate in Antarctica. Um, there was a time when most of the landmasses were closer to a pole; they weren't so close to the equator. Uh, maybe 200 million years ago Antarctica was attached to the South American continent; oh, and Africa was attached too, and the three of them began moving away from the equator together.

. . . in the Himalayas. That was where two continental plates collided. Two continents on separate plates. Um, when this, uh, Indian, uh, uh, plate collided with the Asian plate, it wasn't until then that we created the Himalayas. When we did that, then we started creating the type of cold climate that we see there now. Wasn't there until this area was uplifted.

So again, that's something else that plate tectonics plays a critical role in. Now, these processes are relatively slow; the, uh, Himalayas are still rising, but on the order of millimeters per year. So they're not dramatically influencing climate on your—the time scale of your lifetime. But over the last few thousands of—tens of thousands of years, uh—hundreds of thousands of years—yes, they've dramatically influenced it.

Uh, another important thing—number three—on how plate tectonics have influenced climate is how they've influenced—we talked about how changing landmasses can affect atmospheric circulation patterns, but if you alter where the landmasses are connected, it can impact oceanic, uh, uh, uh, circulation patterns.

. . . Um, so, uh, these other processes, if, if we were to disconnect North and South America right through the middle—say, through Panama—that would dramatically influence climate in North and South America—probably the whole globe. So suddenly now as the two continents gradually move apart, you can have different circulation patterns in the ocean between the two. So, uh, that might cause a dramatic

change in climate if that were to happen, just as we've had happen here in Antarctica to separate, uh, from South America.

What is the main topic of the lecture?

- ⬭ The differences in climate that occur in different countries
- ⬭ How movement of the Earth's plates can affect climate
- ⬭ Why the ocean has less effect on climate than previously thought
- ⬭ The history of the climate of the region where the university is located

Explanation

Choice 2 is the answer that best represents the main topic of the lecture. The professor uses Antarctica and the Himalayas as examples to make the general point that climate is affected by plate tectonics, the movement of Earth's plates.

Note that for Gist-content questions the correct answer and the incorrect choices can sometimes be worded more abstractly.

The following Gist-content question refers to the same lecture:

What is the main topic of the lecture?

- ⬭ A climate experiment and its results
- ⬭ A geologic process and its effect
- ⬭ How a theory was disproved
- ⬭ How land movement is measured

Explanation

Once again, the correct answer is choice 2. Even though the wording is very different, it basically says the same thing as choice 2 in the previous example: a geologic process (movement of Earth's plates) has an effect (changes in climate).

Type 2: Gist-purpose Questions

Some gist questions focus on the purpose of the conversation or lecture rather than on the content. This type of question will more likely occur with conversations, but Gist-purpose questions may also occasionally be asked about lectures.

How to Recognize Gist-purpose Questions

Gist-purpose questions are typically phrased as follows:

- Why does the student visit the professor?
- Why does the student visit the registrar's office?
- Why did the professor ask to see the student?
- Why does the professor explain X?

Tips for Gist-purpose Questions

- Students visit professors during office hours for various reasons, including cases in which a professor invites a student in to discuss the student's performance on an assignment. To answer a Gist-purpose question, look in your notes for information that identifies the reason that the student visited the professor in the first place.
- The purpose of a conversation is not always related to the conversation's main topic. For example, a student might visit her professor for the purpose of asking a question about the professor's grading policy. After answering her question, the professor might spontaneously ask how the student is progressing on a research project, and the rest of the conversation is about that project.
- In service encounter conversations, the student is often trying to solve a problem. Understanding what the student's problem is and how it will be solved will help you answer the Gist-purpose question.

Example

Narrator
Listen to a conversation between a professor and a student.

Student
I was hoping you could look over my note cards for my presentation . . . just to see what you think of it.

Professor
Okay, so refresh my memory: what's your presentation about?

Student
Two models of decision making . . .

Professor
Oh, yes—the classical and the administrative model.

Student
Yeah, that's it.

Professor
And what's the point of your talk?

Student
I'm gonna talk about the advantages and disadvantages of both models.

Professor
But what's the point of your talk? Are you going to say that one's better than the other?

Student
Well, I think the administrative model's definitely more realistic. But I don't think it's complete. It's kind of a tool . . . a tool to see what can go wrong.

Professor

Okay, so what's the point of your talk? What are you trying to convince me to believe?

Student

Well, uh, the classical model—you shouldn't use it by itself. A lot of companies just try to follow the classical model, but they should really use both models together.

Professor

Okay, good. So let me take a look at your notes here . . . Oh, typed notes, . . . Wow you've got a lot packed in here. Are you sure you're going to be able to follow this during your talk?

Student

Oh, sure; that's why I typed them, because otherwise . . . well, my handwriting's not very clear.

Why does the student visit the professor?

- ⬭ To get some note cards for his presentation
- ⬭ To show her some examples of common errors in research
- ⬭ To review the notes for his presentation with her
- ⬭ To ask for help in finding a topic for his presentation

Explanation

While much of the conversation is concerned with the content of the man's presentation, the correct answer to the question "Why does the man visit the professor?" is choice 3: "To review the notes for his presentation with her."

Type 3: Detail Questions

Detail questions require you to understand and remember explicit details or facts from a lecture or conversation. These details are typically related, directly or indirectly, to the gist of the conversation or lecture, by providing elaboration, examples, or other support. In some cases where there is a long digression that is not clearly related to the main idea, you may be asked about some details of the digression.

How to Recognize Detail Questions

Detail questions are typically phrased as follows:

- According to the professor, what is one way that X can affect Y?
- What is X?
- What resulted from the invention of the X?
- According to the professor, what is the main problem with the X theory?

Tips for Detail Questions

- Refer to your notes as you answer. You will not be asked about minor points. Your notes should contain the major details from the conversation or lecture.
- Do not choose an answer only because it contains some of the words that were used in the conversation or lecture. Incorrect responses will often contain words and phrases from the lecture or conversation.
- If you are unsure of the correct response, decide which one of the choices is most consistent with the main idea of the conversation or lecture.

Examples

Professor

Uh, other things that glaciers can do is, uh, as they retreat, instead of depositing some till, uh, scraped-up soil, in the area, they might leave a big ice block, and it breaks off, and as the ice block melts, it leaves a depression, which can become a lake. These are called kettle lakes. These are very critical ecosystems in this region, um, because, uh, uh, they support some unique biological diversity, these kettle lakes do.

The Great Lakes are like this; they were left over from the Pleist—from the Pleistocene glaciers. Uh, the Great Lakes used to be a lot bigger as the glaciers were retreating; some of the lakes were as much as a hundred feet higher in elevation. The beach of a former higher stage of Lake Erie was about 50 miles away from where the beach—the current beach of Lake Erie—is right now. So I just wanted to tell you a little bit more about glaciers and some *positive* things, uh, that we get from climate change, like the ecosystems that develop in these kettle lakes, and how we can look at them in an environmental perspective . . .

What are kettle lakes?

- ⬭ Lakes that form in the center of a volcano
- ⬭ Lakes that have been damaged by the greenhouse effect
- ⬭ Lakes formed by unusually large amounts of precipitation
- ⬭ Lakes formed when pieces of glaciers melt

How did the glaciers affect the Great Lakes?

- ⬭ They made the Great Lakes smaller.
- ⬭ They made the Great Lakes deeper.
- ⬭ They reduced the biodiversity of the Great Lakes.
- ⬭ They widened the beaches around the Great Lakes.

Explanation

The answer to the first question is found in the beginning of the lecture when the professor explains what a kettle lake is. Remember that new terminology is often tested in Detail questions. The answer to the second question is found later in the lecture where the professor says, "the Great Lakes used to be a lot bigger as the glaciers were retreating."