

Listening Topic 2: Identifying Main Ideas

There are four keys to identifying main ideas in lectures and presentations. First, a speaker may signal a main idea through **discourse markers**; that is, speakers often use certain phrases to mark or emphasize their main ideas. Here are some examples:

The point I want to make/cover here is...

The main point is...

The important thing here is...

What I'm trying to show is...

What I'm going to talk about today is...

The purpose of my remarks is ...

This afternoon I'd like to explain/focus on...

In the next 50 minutes, I'm going to outline/trace/review...



See [Listening Topic 5](#) for more information on discourse markers.

Similarly, speakers often use **rhetorical questions** to signal main ideas, topics, and themes. These are questions that the speaker asks out loud, and that the speaker plans to answer in his/her presentation. In general, rhetorical questions *will always be answered in the lecture or presentation*. Therefore, rhetorical questions are important discourse markers to pay attention to. For example, in Part 1 of Lecture 7, Professor Vicenti asks, "What does one require of an airplane? So if you're going to invent the airplane...what does an airplane have to do?" Here, the professor is using rhetorical questions to introduce the main ideas of his talk.

Another key to identifying main ideas is **repetition**, or how many times a word or phrase is repeated. If something is repeated several times, it suggests importance. For example, in Part 1 of Lecture 9, the word "women" is repeated ten times; the words "history," "American" and "reform" are each repeated four times; the name Miriam Van Waters is heard twice; and the phrases "social reform movements" and "female reform tradition" are heard two times each. These repetitions accurately reflect the main ideas of this segment:

- Professor Freedman will discuss the topic of women's social reform movements in American history.
- More specifically, she will talk about what she has called "the female reform tradition" and will use the story of Miriam Van Waters to illustrate this tradition.

The third key to identifying main or important ideas is **pace**. Pace is the speed of speech. Unimportant points or small details are usually spoken about more quickly. Important points, such as main ideas, are usually spoken about more slowly and clearly. Therefore, you should make an effort to increase listening intensity during more slowly spoken segments; alternatively, you should try not to get anxious or panicked if you miss a line which is spoken very quickly.

For example, Part 1 of Lecture 8 ends with the following line: "...As your kids age, they become more and more complex, or, from a parental perspective, difficult to manage." The

phrase “from a parental perspective” is a somewhat unnecessary, parenthetical point. That is, this phrase is less important than the rest of the sentence. When you listen to this sentence in the lecture, you will notice that this phrase is spoken much more quickly than the rest of the sentence.

A few moments later, at the beginning of Lecture 8, Part 2, the professor comments:

“The behaviorists notion, which most of us, I think, were raised with, especially in this country – I grew up in Europe, so it’s a little different there – have this idea: that kids, when they’re born, are essentially an empty slate.”

Can you guess which part of this is spoken more slowly and clearly? Here it is again, with the slow, deliberate phrases underlined:

The behaviorist notion, which most of us, I think, were raised with, especially in this country – I grew up in Europe, so it’s a little different there – have this idea: **that kids, when they’re born, are essentially an empty slate.**

Finally, a lecturer’s visual aids, such as outlines, lists or drawings, often provide obvious clues to a speaker’s main points. For example, in Lecture 7, Professor Vicenti draws a diagram which demonstrates an important concept in aeronautics. In Lecture 8, Professor Steiner shows a slide which summarizes the main points of his talk. These types of visual aids should be taken advantage of. In fact, there is an old piece of academic advice which states that when a speaker has made the effort to write something on the board, you should make the effort to write it in your notes!