B. YOUR UNIVERSITY STUDIES

In this second section of the book we describe the regular things students do at university as part of their studies. We could have called Chapters 4 to 7 "Listening", "Speaking", "Reading" and "Writing" but that would be too simple. Although people think of lectures as a time for listening, they are really much more than that. As you will see in Chapter 11, lectures are also a time for writing and for making connections with what you have been reading. Similarly in tutorials (Chapter 5) students need to be good listeners if they want to be good talkers.

The final chapter of this section is for postgraduate students. This talks about the stages students work through as they put together a thesis or dissertation. This includes information about working with the lecturer who is your supervisor.

4. LECTURES

In the first two chapters of this book you read about the planning you needed to do before starting your university studies and in Chapter 3 you read about ways of improving your English. The rest of this book is for students who know what they are going to study. This Chapter explains what you can expect in lectures. You probably know that lectures are very different from school classes but you may wonder what these differences mean. In this chapter we look at ways to make understanding lectures and taking notes easier and more successful.

This chapter answers the following questions:

What is the purpose of lectures?

How are lectures organised?

How can students take good notes?

Do students ask questions in lectures?

THE PURPOSE OF LECTURES

Most university courses include weekly lectures, often in large theatres with the lecturer standing at the front talking to rows of students as they take notes and

occasionally, as we shall see, asking questions. Each lecture is on one topic only, which is decided beforehand and is usually listed on the course outline. When you enrol for your course the first thing you will want to know is your lecture timetable. This may be in the university calendar or departmental handbook.

Lectures are different from school classes and they are different from other parts of university life. In lectures people mainly just listen and take notes instead of talking in groups or doing tasks as happens in secondary school. Another difference from school classes is the numbers. Lectures vary in size but in some first-year courses there may be hundreds of students in the same room. If the course is very popular the same lecture may be repeated two or three times during the week.

Students' views

Let's hear what some students think is the purpose of a university lecture.

I think lecturers should tell us everything they want us to know on the topic. How else can we pass our tests?

This first student probably has a different idea from the staff about the purpose of a lecture. Maybe he or she is thinking back to school days when it was possible for the teacher to say everything students needed for a test. At university, on the other hand, learning is much wider and the lecturer will expect people to read the set books and other reading.

Here is another student's idea.

Some students told me it doesn't matter if you don't go to a lecture because it's all in the book. That seems strange. Why bother to have lectures if they don't say anything new?

That student is asking a good question. There must be some good reasons for going or nobody would turn up. Let's hear from the staff .

Lecturers' views

We asked some university staff what they think lectures are for. Here are some of their answers.

We try to make difficult topics easier in our lectures.

The idea is to interest students in topics so they'll go and read more.

Lectures are a chance for students to hear opinions from people who have done research in such and such an area.

Students could find out all the content of lectures by reading lots of books and articles. Coming to the lecture is a way of getting an overview.

Even today, when many departments put information on a website for students, lectures are a big part of university life. Staff use lectures to:

Introduce new topics

Make students interested in a topic

Help students to think about the topic

Highlight the most important points

Tell students which other sources are worth reading

Make difficult points easier to understand

Encourage students to want to find out more

Give examples to help students remember the topic

Link this week's topic with last week's.

HOW ARE LECTURES ORGANISED?

We can't say that all lectures follow the same pattern, but generally we can say that lectures will have an introduction, then the main topic and finally a conclusion. As well as the lecturer's spoken words there may also be handouts, overhead transparencies, a powerpoint presentation and lecturers also write on the board from time to time.

The introduction

At the very beginning of the lecture, a lecturer usually tells students what today's lecture will be about. Table 6 shows some ways of doing this.

LISTEN FOR THESE WORDS….	IN OTHER WORDS……
I'd like to talk about…	This is the topic.

What we're doing today is…. *This morning we'll start looking at..*	
In other words…. *What they're saying is….* *So the question is…..*	This is what the topic means. (The lecturer is explaining things.)
That's not the same as…. *That's not what we really mean by..*	This is what it doesn't mean. Here is something similar but different.

Table 6: The lecture introduction

Understanding the lecture can be quite difficult for students who speak English as a second language, as this person says.

I could understand all the words but I don't really know what the topic was.

The topic is usually announced beforehand in the course outline. In that case, you could prepare yourself by reading the text book chapter on the topic, or thinking of questions you hope the lecture will answer and discuss those with other students.

At the beginning of the lecture you may be given the topic on the board or the overhead or the lecturer says what the topic is. Sometimes the topic is put in the form of a question like this:

What do we know about …… ?

Why have people often tried to find out….?

We call these 'rhetorical' questions which means that nobody expects anyone except the lecturer to answer them.

In summary, the lecture introduction probably answers questions like these:

What are we talking about today?

Why is this topic important?

What are the main words for talking about the topic?

How does this topic link with other parts of the course?

What is not covered in this lecture?

How will the lecture be organised?

The body of the lecture

Once the topic has been given, the lecturer starts to explain it. You may even hear one point explained in two or three different ways. Listen for words like these:

This means…

In other words…

Another way of expressing that is to say…

When the lecturer uses these words you are hearing the same point again. Another way of making the meaning clear is through examples. Some lecturers also tell you what the topic does not mean. When a topic is very detailed it is easy to get confused.

In summary, in Table 7 are some words to listen for in the body of the lecture.

LISTEN FOR THESE WORDS….		IN OTHER WORDS ……
And that leads to… *We now come to look at …* *Right. Well, if we move on…* *What I'd like to do now is…* *O.K. now…*	1	Here's a new topic.
For instance… *For example…* *One way this works out is…* *Let me give you an illustration.* *This means…*	2	Here's an example or an explanation.
According to… *X would have us believe…* *Y says…*	3	This is what someone else thinks.
I think this is … *The most interesting point here is…* *Let me just say in parentheses…*	4	This is what I think.
By the way… *I might say here…*	5	This is interesting but not important.
So where was I? *Well anyway…* *To get back on the track…*	6	Now I'm getting back to the topic.

So… *What I'm saying is…*	7	Here's a summary.

Table 7: The lecturer's words and their meaning

Let's look at each of these points in more detail.

1. A sub-topic

A sub-topic is a small part of the main lecture topic. How do you recognise the start of a sub-topic? One way is to listen for the words. Students find themselves waiting for the next time that Lecturer X says "OK" or Lecturer Y says "Right" to know when a new point is coming, but everyone has their own favourite words for introducing a sub-topic. You will start to recognise these from different lecturers.

As well as listening for the words that announce the next topic you can look and listen for other signs such as these:

The lecturer may walk to a different spot at the front of the room.

The lecturer's voice may change (go higher or lower).

The lecturer may look up at the class.

There may be a short space between sentences.

The lecturer may turn to another page of notes.

2. Examples or explanations

One way of making the topic easy to understand is with examples. The example may be from the past or the present and from this country or another country.
In some subjects like geography or archaeology, the examples may be photographs presented through the computer (Powerpoint) or as overheads.

3. Other people's opinions about the topic

Although some university topics are about facts, many are also about opinions. Lecturers will tell what Person A thinks and what Person B thinks, A and B being people who have studied the topic and done research on it. Their names are important to remember so that you can read more about their work later (You will need exactly the right spelling to find them on the computer). Talking about one piece of research by one person may take up five minutes of the lecture. Sometimes students want a short, easy answer to the question *"Does that mean that X is…..?"* but the lecturer may answer, "*That depends on how you define X." or "A believes….. but according to B ……"*

4. The lecturer's views

At other times lecturers themselves may say what they think about topics:

"According to research my colleagues and I are doing at the moment….."

5. Extra comments to make students interested

At the start of this chapter we saw that one purpose of a lecture is to make students interested in the topic. Lecturers do this in different ways such as by telling a joke. These jokes or extra comments are not new points and you don't have to write them

down in detail. Sometimes, through, writing a word or two may help you understand the point better and remember it later.

How can you tell when a lecturer is adding something extra? Look and listen for these signs:

The lecturer may look up from his/ her notes

His/her voice may change tone

Other students may stop writing and just listen.

6. Getting back to the topic

After the joke or the story or the extra comment, the lecturer may say something like "Where was I?". The other way of knowing that the lecture is continuing is to watch the body language and listen to the voice. Perhaps lecturers look back at their notes or change back to their more formal lecturing style.

The conclusion of the lecture

You know that a lecture is coming to an end partly because all lectures must finish at a certain time. However you will also know that it is coming to an end if you hear one of these ways of ending.

A summary of today's topic

Many lecturers end by telling you what you have just heard:

And so we have seen…

Today we've been talking about…

In summary…

In a word…

The main point of the lecture

There has probably been one main point to the whole lecture. Towards the end the lecturer may remind the class of this.

The important thing to remember is…

The main point is…

Next week's topic

The lecturer may also end by looking ahead to next week.

Today we've looked at… Next week we'll…

Looking ahead…

LISTENING TO LECTURES

What's special about listening to lectures?

Most of us do plenty of listening in our lives, so why do we find it difficult to listen to lectures? There are differences between listening to lectures and most other kinds of listening.

In conversations we have a turn at speaking as well as at listening, but in lectures the person at the front does all the speaking. It is true that some lectures sound a bit like conversations because the speaker includes you in the conversation:

"You probably remember…"

When we listen to the radio or TV we don't have to take notes. We can sit back and listen. 24 hours later we remember things that are important to us but we have forgotten the rest. In lectures there's no sitting back. Students have to work hard to take down the important points.

However, the lecturer and the newsreader may be the same in one way. Some lecturers actually read their notes, sentence by sentence. This may mean you don't have many comments that are not important. It means that the speaker has planned not just *what* to say but also *how* to say it.

In language classes students sometimes listen to dictations. The teacher slows down so you can take down every word. A lecture is not like a dictation. You are listening to a voice that doesn't stop or slow down as you write.

When we listen to speeches we are listening for the main message rather than for the details. Some speeches try to make us do something ("Vote for me!") while other, try to make us feel something ("This is an important day for our country"). By contrast in a lecture the students are not generally being asked to do or feel anything (except

interest!). Instead the speaker wants them to know something ("This is important for you to realise.").

Listening to a story

Another kind of listening is when we listen to people telling us interesting things that have happened to them. They might start, "Listen to what happened to me on the way in this morning….." . We listen to the story and then at the end we might say something to show we were interested but we don't need to repeat the story to anyone.

Students' listening problems

Because lectures need a special type of listening, students report problems. Here are some examples.

Understanding a "new" accent

One thing students say is difficult about listening to lectures is understanding a "new" accent. Maybe your high school English teacher talked with one kind of accent and now your lecturers use a different one. In English speaking universities the staff come from many different countries and from different parts of the same country. This means that even though they are all speaking English, it may take a week or two to get used to their accents.

Suggestions

1. Look at the lecture topic on the course outline beforehand and make sure you understand the title.

2. Read the text book chapter on the topic.

3. Think about the questions you think the lecturer will be answering.

Understanding fast talkers

A second problem can be the speed of the lecturer's talking. Some students don't even know if what they are writing down is one word or two.

Suggestions

1. Ask if you can record the lecture on tape. Some lecturers allow recordings.

2. Try to note key points like names, statistics and dates.

3. Use a capital letter instead of writing the key word every time it is mentioned. For example if the lecture is about water pressure just write WP each time.

4. Make up your own shorthand system for common words. Here are some that are often used.

&	= and
#	= number

A = B = A equals B

A ⇨ B = A leads to B

@ = at

5. Use plenty of space on the page as you take your notes. Make lists and sketches. You can add details later from your text book.

6. Write down what you <u>think</u> you hear. Then later try saying it aloud if it doesn't make sense. Maybe "be low" is really "below" for example.

7. Go over your notes later with another student. This is actually a good idea even if you have understood most of the lecture.

<u>Understanding jokes</u>

Another problem is understanding jokes. As you know from your own language, jokes depend on understanding the words but also knowing a lot of things that are not said. Furthermore, jokes are not funny unless the speaker and the listeners like making jokes about the same thing. A joke about an animal could be funny in one country but offensive in another.

Suggestions

There is not too much you can do about jokes. It's annoying to see other people laughing and not knowing why, but some of the students who are laughing may not

understand the joke either. People sometimes laugh along with the others just to look good. One day as you learn more about the country where you are studying and as your English improves, you will understand the jokes too. It takes time.

Getting used to a different system

Everyone who changes countries has to get used to new things: the food, the way of driving, and of course the language. You might think that lectures will be similar all over the world, but that is not always the case. Listen to these students.

Our lecturers at home helped us to take notes. They used to write a list of points on the board. That way you knew which was point 1, point 2 and so on. Here they just keep going on and on so you don't know where the next point came.

We used to listen to our teachers without writing because they would hand out notes or say "That's all in Chapter 8.". Here, if you don't get it down you're lost.

Why don't they speak slowly? Our teachers used to dictate the notes.

The problem here is you can't expect the same thing from all the lecturers. They all have their own styles.

Suggestions

1. Remind yourself that finding lectures difficult and strange is quite common for all first-year university students.

2. Talk with other people, including native speakers of English, and ask them how they help themselves to understand lectures.

Listening, looking and writing at the same time

In lectures you are doing three things at the same time: writing, listening and looking. "How can I write fast enough to take down all the important bits?", students ask. While lecturers are talking they may also be writing on the board, pointing to overhead transparencies and showing slides. Maybe there are handouts as well to refer to.

Suggestions

1. Look up from your notetaking from time to time because, as we saw earlier, there are clues from the way the lecturer moves around.
2. Listen to what the lecturer says about the handouts. Are they the same as the lecture or something extra?

Finding links between the lecture and the textbook

If you are better at reading English than at listening, then you may notice that the lecturer's words are sometimes different from the words in your textbook. Of course the important words for the subject will be the same, but not all the words that join the ideas. The same thing probably happens in your language. People write differently from the way they speak.

Suggestions

1. Read the text book chapter before the lecture.

2. If you can't do that, read it soon afterwards looking at your notes to see how they match.

Test yourself

To end this section, see if you can do this task. The lecturer's words (in Column A) do not match their meaning in Column B. See if you can match each word with the right meaning. [Answers are at the end of this chapter.]

COLUMN 1: WORDS	COLUMN 2: MEANING
a We should be careful not to think of x as y.	1 extra details
	2 next point
b [Lecturer walks away from notes and talks.]	3 a comparison and a contrast
c This leads to the point that…..	4 a very important point
d It's a bit like yesterday's case but not quite the same.	5 non-example
e Now, where was I?	6 an explanation
f …. and this is really the key.	7 back to the topic
g Let me now talk about x then we'll go on to y.	8 an example
h One of the most common instances is…	
i In other words….	

TAKING NOTES IN LECTURES

Students always hope that they can take notes that will be clear enough for later study. Good notetaking is an important skill for university. In this section we answer questions that students often ask about notetaking.

Why take notes?

Some students take no notes in the lecture. They say it's better to sit and listen to everything. That may sound like a good idea but how many people can remember an hour's talk if they have no notes? We asked some students why they took notes and this is what they said:

It helps me read the textbook.

My mind doesn't walk off if I am writing.

Writing helps me think.

I use my notes to study for the tests.

What can go wrong with notetaking?

Students say there are three main problems with notetaking.

1. They can't write down enough.

2. They can't read their own handwriting later because they have to write so fast.

3. Even if they can understand their notes they never find time to go over them until just before the examination.

Having pages and pages of notes is not always the answer. It might be better to have a few notes that make sense than pages and pages that you can't read.

How do students take good notes?

We asked some students to give advice on good note-taking. Here are their answers:

Don't try to write down everything. Just note the key points.

Try to understand what is being said when taking notes.

Read the text book chapters before the lecture.

Say to yourself "What do I know about this already?"

Don't be afraid to ask other students when you miss a point.

Here are some students talking about how they like to take notes. Read what they say and then decide which ideas sound useful to you and which you think would be a waste of time.

<u>Student 1</u>

I try to listen to an idea and then write it down in my own words.

Student 2

Translating everything into my language seemed like a good idea at first but that took too much time. Now I just use my dictionary later if I don't understand a word.

Student 3

I go really fast and try to take down every word. My friend does the same. Then we go and have coffee and compare notes and fill in the missing bits.

Student 4

If the lecturer puts anything up on the overhead that's my time for writing really fast.

Student 5

After the lecture I do little drawings in the margin. That's my way of remembering things.

Student 6

I use lots of numbers and arrows and boxes to keep track of everything. The only trouble is when the lecturer says "third point" I'm sometimes up to point 7. I've never been able to work out why.

Student 7

I spend a lot of time in lectures worrying because of all the stuff I haven't written down.

Some students take notes twice. The first time is in class as they listen, and the second time comes when they re-read their notes after class and rewrite them more clearly. The advantage of this is that after the lecture (preferably on the same day) you will remember most of what was said in the lecture. As you rewrite your notes you can note the most important points in words that are clear to you.

One teacher's advice

First year Commerce course students at one university were asked how they took notes and what they did with them afterwards. Then they gave their notes to a teacher who looked at them carefully. Here in Table 8 is a summary of the problems the teacher noticed along with suggestions for better notetaking.

STUDENTS	SUGGESTION
Kept repeating words like this: Principle 1, Principle 2……	Save time by putting a general heading and then numbering each one. e.g. <u>Principles</u> 1. 2. 3. etc
Left no margin	Difficult to read No space for adding details later
Used very small pieces of paper	Small handwriting difficult to read later
Copied quotes without "…"	Difficult to reference later in essays

Table 8 : Weaknesses in notetaking

Table 9 lists what the teacher said was good about the notes and why.

GOOD POINT	WHY IS IT GOOD?
clear script	easier reading later
a diagram	faster notetaking
two colours	distinguishes main headings & sub-points
abbreviations	faster notetaking
underlining	easier reading later
plenty of space	room to add details from textbook later
capitals for headings	headings stand out
dates & figures	facts to revise later
symbols	faster notetaking

Table 9 : Good points in notetaking

Planning your own notetaking

You have read about what other students do. Now it is time to plan your own notetaking. Use these questions to help you start planning.

1. How much do you plan to write down?

I want to write down everything the lecturer says.

I'll try to write down only the important things.

I'll copy everything from all the overhead transparencies.

2. Why do you take notes in lectures?

To save time so I needn't read so much.

To help me think about the topic.

To help me understand the textbook.

To prepare me for further reading.

To guide me in preparing for tests and exams.

3. How will you use your notes later?

I'd like to rewrite them.

I'll read them at least once.

I won't use my notes. I'll ask to see other people's notes.

5. You can answer this question if you have already started notetaking in lectures.

I wish I could take down more.

I can understand the lecturer and take notes at the same time.

I am usually too busy writing to think about meaning.

I worry about missing points as I wrote.

ASKING QUESTIONS IN LECTURES

Lectures are mostly a time for listening. However, lecturers do sometimes invite questions and a few students respond.

Why ask questions in lectures?

When the class is very large, as in many first-year courses, you might wonder why any student would be brave enough to ask a question. Of course most students don't ask questions. They say "I'm too shy" or "I'm not smart enough" or "The lecturer won't understand me" or "Everyone knows the answer to this except me". These reasons stop them from finding answers to their questions.

If you can forget your fears you may find that the lecturer's answers to your questions helped everyone in the class, not just you. Sometimes nobody understands a point the lecturer has said and everyone is pleased that someone is brave enough to ask the question. Once a question is asked, all the other students look up and listen.

Here is another reason for asking questions. When nobody asks anything, lecturers think everybody has understood that part of the lecture. Questions show them which parts were unclear or how to explain things better. That means in the next class they may give more examples or use clearer words and explanations.

When can I ask a question?

The usual time to ask questions is when the lecturer asks for them. That may be at the beginning, during, or towards the end of the class. In large lectures not many students interrupt with a question while the lecturer is talking. Listen for the lecturer to invite questions in words like these in Table 10.

THE LECTURER SAYS…	EXPLANATION
Last week we discussed…Does anyone	This question comes at the start of the

want to ask anything about that…? *Any questions?* *Anything you want to discuss?*	lecture. If you have read your lecture notes and still don't understand them, now is the time to ask.
Is everything clear so far?	This question comes during the lecture. You can ask about something the lecturer has just said.
Would anyone like me to go over that once more?	Here the lecturer has explained something difficult. If you didn't understand, now is the time to ask.
Does that help?	This question follows the lecturer's answer to a question. Students usually say "Yes thanks" but if they haven't understood this is the time to ask.

Table 10: Invitations to ask questions

Sometimes you are not sure whether or not to ask a question. Maybe the lecturer has said something like this without waiting long enough for anyone to put up their hand:

Now if that's clear we'll move on to the next topic.

Then look at the speaker's 'body language'. If lecturers put down their notes and look round the class as they invite questions then that probably means they really are willing to give answers.

You often see a little crowd at the front waiting to ask questions at the end of the class instead of when the lecturer invited them. If there is time for questions in class, then that's the best time to ask. For one thing all the students can hear the answers. Another reason is that there is very little time at the end of class. If the room is needed for the next class or the lecturer has to go to teach somewhere else, your questions will have to be answered quickly in the corridor. If at the end of the class you still have an unanswered question then you are better to contact the lecturer at another time. In chapters 10 and 11 you can find out which staff to contact and how.

Let's say that the lecturer has invited questions and that you have something to ask. What happens next? How do you know if it's your turn to ask a question? Just watch for the first couple of weeks and you'll soon see what everyone else is doing. In small classes the student might look at the lecturer and then the lecturer names that person, but in bigger classes the most common way of getting a turn is:

1. Put up your hand.

2. Then wait for the lecturer to point to you.

3. Call out your question clearly.

Usually lecturers answer the question immediately. Occasionally, though, they might say something like this, "Good question. We're coming to that in a few minutes". Or the lecturer might check first how many people want an explanation by asking, "How

many of you would like me to explain that?". If nobody else puts up a hand, the lecturer might ask the questioner to stay for a moment at the end.

What sort of questions do students ask during lectures?

Here are some examples of students' questions.

Questions about details

If you don't understand a word or phrase that is repeated through the lecture and seems to be important, then you can ask:

What does X mean?

Excuse me but what do you mean by Y…?

Please could you explain once more….

Other questions remind the lecturer that something has not been quite clear. Notice the words ' *Excuse me '* and '*Please'*. Students who don't use words like these in their own language think that English speakers overuse them, but they are a quick way of making yourself sound more polite and friendly.

Questions about the textbook

Lecturers like questions that show students have been thinking and reading between classes. Here are examples:

On page…of the course book it says… How is that related to today's lecture?

Could you explain the point about… in our book?

What sort of questions is it better not to ask?

Some students ask a question that has just been answered. This can happen if you have been waiting for some time to ask your question and have forgotten to listen to what the lecturer is saying while you wait for your turn. Students sometimes ask "When is the next assignment due?" when the date is written on the board. A few questions about feelings or personal opinions are better asked in tutorials such as:

How do you feel about…?

What do you think about…?

What if my English is weak?

Some students who speak English as a second language worry that nobody will understand their questions. Here are three ideas for asking clear questions.

Speak loudly

In a large lecture room you need to speak up. When people feel shy about their English they sometimes whisper their questions and the lecturer has to ask them to repeat what they have said. If you want to be heard the first time round, speak loudly.

Make the question short and simple

Clear questions are usually short. Plenty of native speakers of English ask questions that are unclear because they are too complicated. Look at the difference between these two questions:

I was wondering about what you just said and I was
thinking that maybe that's why…. but on the other hand maybe it's not.

Is that why……?

In the first example the student is really thinking aloud rather than asking a question. This kind of thinking is helpful in a tutorial (see Chapter 7) where there is time for people to think and to hear one another's views.

Keep to the topic

Try to make your question on today's topic rather than one that will be covered in one of the next lectures. Again, tutorials are the place for asking more general questions.

Don't worry about your English

When you ask a question the lecturer is interested in *what* you are saying rather than *how* you are saying it.

Answers to the task

a = 5 non-example

b = 1 extra details

c = 2 next point

d = 3 a comparison and a contrast

e = 7 back to the topic

f = 4 a very important point

g = 2 next point

h = 8 an example

i = 6 an explanation