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The first question you answer after listening to each conversation, discussion, or academic lecture on the listening portion of the TOEFL iBT often checks your understanding of the main idea of the entire listening passage.

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**Main-Idea Question Overview**

There are two types of main-idea questions:

- **Main-topic questions:** These ask the main topic of a conversation, discussion, or academic lecture--for example:
  - What is the professor mainly talking/speaking about?
  - What is the main topic of the lecture/talk?
  - What is the conversation/discussion/lecture mainly about?
  - What aspect of alternative energy does the professor mainly discuss?
- **Main-purpose questions:** Generally, these ask the main purpose of a conversation. Occasionally, however, these ask the main purpose of an academic lecture or discussion.
  - Why does the woman go to meet her professor?
  - Why does the student go to meet the teaching assistant?
  - What is the main purpose of this conversation/lecture?
  - Why is the woman/man talking to the professor?

Answer Choices:

- **The correct answer choice:**
  - Identifies the main topic or purpose of the conversation, discussion, or lecture
  - May not use the exact words or phrases that are used in the conversation or lecture
- **The incorrect answer choices:**
  - Contain very specific facts
  - Identify relatively minor details
  - Contain information that is contradicted in the listening passage
  - Contain information that is not discussed in the listening passage

Signal Phrases:

Certain words or phrases are used in the conversations, discussions, and lectures to signal a communicative objective. For example, the speaker may be stating a main point, giving an example of something, or summarizing what he or she just said. Listen carefully to the passages for these phrases. In this unit, we will focus on phrases that signal the main idea of a conversation, discussion or lecture:

Example 1

Today, I'd like to talk mainly about [economic profit and loss].

Example 2

The, uh, the topic of today's lecture is [the Modernist movement in literature]. But, um, in particular, I'd like to talk about [what caused the movement in the first place].

Example 3

So we've been talking about [the brain and the spinal cord, and how they interact]. But today, I'd like to change focus a bit and talk about [what's known as the peripheral nervous system].

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Example 4

Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, [Professor Lewis]. I had to--well, the reason I had to come by today is that I, uh--well, I'd like to discuss [the grade you gave me on my midterm, if you don't mind].

Hints:

- Be careful--sometimes distracting information is included, as seen above in the second and third examples. Note how the speaker first describes the point in an overly general way (3) or describes the main idea of a previous lecture (2). Wrong answer choices frequently contain such distracting information.
- Be careful--Although the words on the chalkboard do generally relate to the main idea of the passage, the word(s) may be included in one or more incorrect answer choices. An answer choice is not necessarily correct just because it contains a word that appears on the chalkboard screen.
- While taking notes, underline the main topic or purpose of the academic lecture or conversation when you hear it.

Practice:

Listen to a conversation between a professor and a student. Take notes as you listen. You can compare your notes to the sample notes provided. After listening to the conversation, answer the main-topic question using your notes.

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Begin the audio recording now.

Listen to this conversation between a professor and a student.



Click to listen to the audio



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## Sample Notes on Conversation

S: handed back paper – low grade; “check source”

P: requirements – explore controversy about Foucault book

S: Yes, hard book

P: Covered b well. BUT should talk about debate ? S did not do well // S didn't read Derrida article well? // Derrida attacks Foucault // Derrida article very important, but S didn't

address this

address this

S: read over Derrida too quickly – read night before; underestimated time – Derrida too hard!!

P: should have given self more time

S: no time

P: gets easier // glad S came

S: ?

P: rewrite paper – focus on Derrida ? due one week

S: Yes! ]



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**Sample Main-Idea Question**

Main-Idea Question:

What is the main topic of the conversation?

- ☐ The key differences between two major philosophers
- ☐ The student's use of inappropriate sources on a research paper
- ☒ Why the student's recent assignment was given a low grade
- ☐ How to write more effectively on the upcoming examination

Answer Choice Breakdown:

- Answer Choice 1: The professor does talk about two philosophers; she does not, however, focus on their differences.
- Answer Choice 2: The professor actually said that the student used good sources but thought he had handled one of those sources ineffectively.
- Answer Choice 3: This is the correct answer choice; the student goes to his professor to find out why he received a low grade on a recent assignment.
- Answer Choice 4: The professor does tell the student how to develop his paper better, but no mention is made of an examination.