

STRATEGY-BUILDING AND MEANING-FOCUSED LISTENING WITH “THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER”

This listening activity uses an audio clip from “[The Fall of the House of Usher](#),” part of a short story collection called [Edgar Allan Poe: Storyteller](#).

The activity is designed to develop students’ listening strategies and also includes meaning-focused aspects. Before listening, students use critical thinking skills to make predictions about the story’s tone based on information in the title and their prior knowledge, if any, of the author. They also predict vocabulary words they might hear and then test those predictions while they listen.

After listening, students answer comprehension questions that require them to use details and main ideas in the text to make inferences and predictions. These questions, which require recall and analysis of textual information, are called “of-text” comprehension questions. Finally, students are asked to relate textual content to their own experiences in “text-to-self” comprehension questions. An additional type of comprehension question (not featured in this activity) is called “text-to-world.” This type of question requires students to relate textual information to their wider understanding of society and the world. Combining these types of comprehension questions encourages students to engage deeply with and think critically about a listening or reading text’s content. See the final 10 minutes of Katie Ryan’s 2014 “[Oh, What Fun! Learning English with O. Henry](#)” *Shaping the Way We Teach English* webinar for more information about this approach to creating comprehension questions.

This activity also reflects listening fluency-building principles. Students are exposed to the listening text more than once, and the text complexity has been graded for EFL learners.

LEVEL

Upper intermediate and above

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Listening

- Comprehension – main ideas and details
- Strategy development – inferences and prediction; relating to a listening text

Speaking

GOALS

Students will:

- Make pre-listening predictions about the tone of a story based on inferences about the title and prior knowledge about the author (Note: the author aspect is optional)
- Make predictions about vocabulary they will hear in a listening text using prior knowledge about aspects of the story’s setting

- Listen for and make notes about details and main ideas in a listening text
- Consider and discuss “of-text” and “text-to-self” meaning-focused questions about a listening text

MATERIALS

- Teacher:
 - Whiteboard, chalkboard, or large pieces of paper posted on the wall
 - Markers or chalk
 - “The Fall of the House of Usher” audio clip (.mp3 – 1:59)
 - Audio player (computer, tablet, mobile phone with speakers)
- Students:
 - Pencils or pens, blank writing paper

PREPARATION

- Download, test, and preview the audio clip on your audio playing device. Confirm the volume will be loud enough for the entire class to hear.

PROCEDURES

1. Tell students they are going to listen to a two-minute audio clip from the beginning of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.”
2. Ask students to analyze the story’s title and make predictions about the story’s tone. Based on the words in the title, does it seem like this story will be happy/peaceful/calm or tragic/depressing/mysterious? What word in the title best supports their opinions?
3. If students have read other stories by Poe, either in class or on their own, ask them if what they know about the author confirms their analysis of the title and the story’s tone. Ask students to give examples of other stories by Poe with tragic, mysterious, or dark themes. (optional). Note: Edgar Allan Poe is known for writing mysterious and macabre stories.
4. Give students a short preview of the audio clip’s setting and action, such as, “In this clip, you will hear the story’s narrator describe the first time he sees the Usher family’s house, which is located in the countryside.” Then ask students to predict the vocabulary they might hear. Elicit vocabulary items related to describing a house (e.g., roof, walls, windows, porch, door, etc.) and a rural/countryside setting (trees, flowers, lake, river, etc.). Write students’ predictions on the board.
5. Now that students are primed to hear the listening text, explain they will hear the clip twice, and ask them to get their pencils/pens and paper ready. Tell them to listen the first time for the main idea and for any details that support their predictions about the story’s tone. Encourage students to make brief notes about any words they hear that support the class’s hypothesis about the tone being dark or melancholy.
6. Play the clip. Before playing it again, ask students to listen for and write down any words that describe the house or land around it.
7. After playing the audio clip a second time, facilitate a whole discussion in which students share evidence from their notes and compare it to the predictions the class made about the story’s

tone and clip's expected vocabulary. As the discussion closes, remind students that analyzing the title, thinking about what they already know about an author, and making predictions about a text's content and expected vocabulary are good strategies to use when they prepare to listen to a text.

8. Next, put students in small groups or pairs. Ask them to think about and discuss the following questions. Encourage students to use the notes they made during the listening phase to support their discussions. The first three "of-text" questions ask for a combination of detail recall, inference making, and prediction. The final question is "text-to-self," asking students to relate what they heard to their personal experiences.

- How does the narrator feel about the House of Usher? How do you know?
- Why do think the narrator is at the house?
- What will happen next?
- Have you ever been to a scary place? Describe it. What were the similarities and differences to the House of Usher? How did you feel?

Notes: (1) If you'd like to add a reading element to this portion of the activity, you can pass out the listening text transcript for students to refer to during their discussions. (2) You can write the questions on the board in advance and cover them during the listening stage, or you can write them while students are listening the second time if you can do so in a non-distracting way.

9. Monitor the student discussions. After most groups have finished addressing the questions, facilitate a whole-class discussion and encourage students to share responses from their pairs or small groups.
10. To create motivation to complete related homework or in-class activities, be sure not to give students the answers to the second and third prediction questions. Students will likely want to know what will happen next in the story. Tell them they will have the chance to find out as they read or listen to the next section of the story for homework or in class!