

Missing in London: inside TfL's lost property office

Level 1 • Pre-intermediate / Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. If you lost the following things, would you try hard to find them or just buy new ones?

- keys
- an umbrella
- one shoe

b. Scan the article to read what most people do in these situations.

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then, find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers will help you.

claimed

hunch

depot

insight

value

1. a large building where things are kept until they are needed _____ (para 1)
2. when something is taken by the person who it belongs to _____ (para 4)
3. a chance to understand something or learn more about it _____ (para 5)
4. think of something as being important _____ (para 5)
5. a feeling that something is true or will happen, although you do not know any facts about it _____ (para 8)

charity

disadvantaged

cosmetics

impersonal

tube

6. the system of underground trains in London _____ (para 11)
7. an organization to which you give money so that they can give money and help to people who are poor or ill _____ (para 14)
8. things that you use on your skin to make yourself look more attractive _____ (para 14)
9. without the things that other people have, especially money or enough food _____ (para 14)
10. not friendly; not involving personal feelings _____ (para 18)

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Gavin Haynes

28 August, 2017

- 1 Transport for London's (TfL) lost property office is in Baker Street in London. It's a huge depot that collects the items lost by people who travel on London's transport system each day.
- 2 It is the biggest lost property office in Europe. Sixty-five staff sort hundreds of thousands of lost and forgotten items at the depot, which is run by Paul Cowan.
- 3 Cowan's team sorted through 332,077 items in the last year. These included:
 - 1,200 new items arriving every day;
 - 13,000 keys;
 - 34,322 mobile phones;
 - 46,318 bags;
 - 10,000 umbrellas.
- 4 And very few are claimed. For example, 13,000 keys were handed in to lost property in 2016 but only 1,400 were returned to their owners, says Cowan. Overall, 20% of items are claimed within three months; after that time, they become the property of TfL.
- 5 As I wander through the three basement floors of the lost property office, I get an interesting insight into what we value enough to claim – and what we're happy to let go.
- 6 Cowan explains, "Most people don't bother to look for their keys when they lose them. They change the locks instead."
- 7 Cowan has developed an interesting insight into the human mind. "If you have one shoe, you'll probably look for the other. If you lose two shoes, well, it's 'out of sight, out of mind'," he says.
- 8 Cowan's hunch is that many people see loss as an opportunity to buy themselves something new. He points to a 40-inch TV and a size-13 pair of Nike trainers. There's also a life-size gorilla, which someone lost a couple of years ago, which was adopted by the staff and named Eddie
- 9 In the mobile phone section, hundreds are in yellow or red envelopes, to mark that they were found in a taxi. In 2016, 42.4% of the 34,322 lost

mobile phones were claimed. In the same year, 44.8% of 34,729 of "valuables" (for example, jewellery) were claimed and 40.7% of 46,318 bags.

- 10 People are least likely to claim umbrellas. Just over 2% of the 10,000 umbrellas that were lost in 2016 were returned to their owners. Cowan says they're so cheap that no one bothers to claim them. And if people find an umbrella, they just reuse it, Cowan says.
- 11 One summer, on a couple of days of very heavy rain, Cowan went up to Baker Street and handed out umbrellas to people when they came out of the tube.
- 12 According to the Transport Act of 1982, any item still unclaimed after three months becomes the property of TfL and they can do what they like with it.
- 13 Data must be destroyed "because we have to take the Data Protection Act seriously", says Cowan. Papers and USB sticks are destroyed. Some items – power tools, musical instruments – are sold. The money helps to pay for the depot.
- 14 But many unclaimed items go to charity. Clothes are sent to one of the three main organizations TfL supports. Other small items, such as cosmetics, are put together into care packages for charities. Toys go to disadvantaged children each Christmas.
- 15 Back at the customer service desk, a couple of wallets are returned to their owners – both with cash still inside.
- 16 One wallet belongs to a ten-year-old boy who left it on a bus. He is very happy – he's got his £20 back.
- 17 The other is claimed by a man who left it in a taxi while he was going to the theatre with his family. It still contained £120.
- 18 "Travelling on London's transport system can be very impersonal," Cowan says. "At the lost property office, we want to make it feel more human."

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3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

1. The lost property depot keeps items found on ...
 - a. ... London underground trains.
 - b. ... London buses and taxis.
 - c. ... London underground trains, buses and taxis.
2. Which of these lost items are most likely to be returned to their owners?
 - a. keys
 - b. valuables
 - c. bags
3. Which lost items are most often not claimed by their owners?
 - a. umbrellas
 - b. shoes
 - c. TVs
4. How long must the lost property office keep the items for the owners?
 - a. one month
 - b. three months
 - c. six months
5. What happens to unclaimed clothes?
 - a. They are burnt.
 - b. They are sold.
 - c. They are given to charities.
6. Cowan wants ...
 - a. ... people to stop leaving items on the trains.
 - b. ... people to know that the lost property office cares about them.
 - c. ... more people to bring items to the depot.

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4 A useful expression

- a. Find and underline this expression in the article.

out of sight, out of mind

- b. What does it mean?

1. when you don't think about something for a long time, you forget what it looks like
2. when you do not see or hear about something, you do not think about it

- c. What was it used to talk about in the article?

- d. What else can be out of sight, out of mind?

5 Discussion

- Have you ever left anything on a bus, train, plane etc?
 - o What was it?
 - o When did you notice that you no longer had it with you?
 - o What did you do?
 - o Did you get it back?
- Have you ever found anything that someone else has lost?
 - o What was it?
 - o Where did you find it?
 - o Did you keep it?

6 Webquest

Look at the photos that accompany the article and discuss what you see.

www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/aug/28/inside-transport-for-london-lost-property-office

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KEY

1 Warmer

b.

keys - Most people don't bother to look when they lose their keys. They assume they've been compromised and change the locks instead.

umbrellas – Only 2% are reclaimed because they're so cheap that people just replace them.

one shoe – People are more likely to go looking for one shoe than two.

2 Key words

1. depot
2. claimed
3. insight
4. value
5. hunch
6. tube
7. charity
8. cosmetics
9. disadvantaged
10. impersonal

3 Comprehension check

1. c
2. b
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. b

4 A useful expression

- b. definition 2
- c. lost pairs of shoes
- d. examples – a boyfriend or girlfriend (when they go away), mess (if you close the door on it)