



UNIT 9B · BUSINESS C1

The unsaid, the implied

Class Book and Workbook · one complete unit

OBJECTIVES

What you'll be able to do

4 min

- Compress the opening of a difficult conversation into the elliptical register the counterparty can, under load, actually hear.
- Use verbal, nominal and clausal ellipsis (has / does / one / so / not) and the pro-form substitution to answer without opening ground the room has not agreed to enter.
- Distinguish the compassion fragment from the memorised template — and know which the receiver reads as human.
- Design a prep-sheet paragraph whose ratio of full to elliptical sentences predicts, in advance, whether the message will land.

LEAD-IN

The three words the room will actually hear

8 min

FRAME · THE PREP-SHEET ON SUNDAY EVENING

On your own, in writing, answer the following:

- Take the opening sentence of a real or imagined difficult conversation you will need to have this quarter. Count its words. Now rewrite it in five or fewer.
- Which recoverable clause did you cut? Which one did you fight to keep? What does the one you fought to keep tell you about the sentence you were, in the room, going to hide behind?
- The counterparty's inevitable follow-up: 'was it me?' Write the shortest elliptical answer you would be willing to say aloud. Which noun did you not introduce, and why not?
- Design your compassion fragment. Not the memorised paragraph. Three words maximum. Say it out loud twice.

Bring the two openings, the elliptical answer and the compassion fragment to the next class. Your teacher will place the fifty-word and the five-word versions side by side.

READING

The elliptical sentence a difficult conversation is actually delivered in

15 min

There is a sentence a manager cannot in advance write in the register of a full paragraph, and it is the sentence the room, on the day, will fail on. The sentence is short. It carries the emotional weight of the whole conversation, and it does so in the specific register of English's elliptical grammar — the register in which the recoverable clauses have, deliberately, been cut.

The junior version of the sentence is written in the fully-spelled-out register a manager reaches for to protect themselves from the sentence they are about to say. Marcus, I need to tell you that unfortunately, following the restructuring that was announced last week and which affects the department that you are in, your role, which is one of three roles being consolidated into a single position, is being made redundant. One sentence. Fifty-two words. Six subordinate clauses. Under a fluent reading it is competent prose. Under the reading a person in the middle of hearing they are losing their job actually performs, it is inaudible — Marcus stops listening at "unfortunately" and by "redundant" has processed almost none of the syntax between.

The senior version of the sentence is written with deliberate ellipsis. Marcus. Your role is being made redundant. The three roles are being consolidated into one. I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear. Five sentences. Twenty-three words. Every recoverable clause — the department, the announcement, the restructuring — has been cut. The substitution "one" carries the noun "position" without repeating the bureaucratic form. The compassion clause "I'm sorry" carries weight precisely because every extra word has been stripped. Marcus, in the same emotional state, can hear every sentence and can, in a fortnight when the room is a memory, reconstruct what was said.

The paired discipline is the substitution move in the second minute of the conversation. When the counterparty asks the inevitable follow-up — was it me? — the elliptical answer, using a bare "no" or the substitution "not", protects both parties. No. It wasn't. Three words. The full-form answer — "it was not your individual performance that led to this decision" — opens semantic ground the room has not agreed to enter, and the manager, having opened it, cannot then close it. Ellipsis and substitution are not politeness devices; they are the grammar of proportionality.

The uncomfortable corollary is that the elliptical register is not, in the end, a stylistic preference. It is the discipline by which a difficult message is delivered without the receiver, or the messenger, being humiliated by the delivery. Managers whose scripts read as complete, subject-verb-object grammatical sentences are managers who, in the bad case, retreat behind the grammar and never say the sentence the conversation required.

Choose the best answer.

- The writer's central claim about the elliptical register is that it:

- (a) is more polite
- (b) is the grammar by which a difficult message is delivered without the receiver, or the messenger, being humiliated by the delivery
- (c) sounds informal
- (d) is faster

Answer key: (b) is the grammar by which a difficult message is delivered without the receiver, or the messenger, being humiliated by the delivery

- The fifty-two-word 'restructuring' sentence fails because:

- (a) it is ungrammatical
- (b) in the emotional state Marcus is in, he processes almost none of the syntax between 'unfortunately' and 'redundant'
- (c) it uses passives
- (d) it is too formal

Answer key: (b) in the emotional state Marcus is in, he processes almost none of the syntax between 'unfortunately' and 'redundant'

- The substitution 'one' in 'the three roles are being consolidated into one' works because it:

- (a) is shorter
- (b) carries the noun 'position' without repeating the bureaucratic form — the elliptical alternative sounds human, the repeated noun sounds procedural
- (c) avoids repetition
- (d) sounds fluent

Answer key: (b) carries the noun 'position' without repeating the bureaucratic form — the elliptical alternative sounds human, the repeated noun sounds procedural

- The reason a bare 'No. It wasn't.' is preferred to 'It was not your individual performance that led to this decision' is that:

- (a) it is quicker
- (b) the full form opens semantic ground the room has not agreed to enter — and, once opened, the manager cannot close it
- (c) 'performance' is a strong word
- (d) it is more direct

Answer key: (b) the full form opens semantic ground the room has not agreed to enter — and, once opened, the manager cannot close it

- The 'uncomfortable corollary' the text closes on is that managers whose scripts read as complete grammatical sentences are managers who:

- (a) are more thorough
- (b) retreat behind the grammar and, in the bad case, never say the sentence the conversation required
- (c) sound professional
- (d) avoid mistakes

Answer key: (b) retreat behind the grammar and, in the bad case, never say the sentence the conversation required

Teacher notes

Follow-up: Ask the student which single sentence from the reading they would pin above their own desk on the morning of a difficult conversation. Why that one?

AUTHENTIC READING · REAL TEXT

On the elliptical paragraph a manager prepares on Sunday and the room accepts on Monday

Source: Adapted from Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen (Difficult Conversations), Susan Scott (Fierce Conversations) and Amy Gallo (HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict) · Excerpted for classroom use under fair-dealing for educational commentary.

C1+

≈ 470 words

The Harvard Difficult Conversations project team and a leading HBR conflict-guide author on the specific paragraph a manager prepares on a Sunday evening for a Monday-morning conversation — and on the elliptical grammar the paragraph either has, or does not have, when the room begins.

There is a paragraph a manager writes on a Sunday evening before every difficult conversation worth having, and it is the paragraph whose grammatical register — full-form or elliptical — will, more than any other single factor, determine whether the conversation on Monday morning delivers its message or drifts around it. The paragraph is short. It carries the emotional weight of the whole exchange, and its ratio of subject-verb-object sentences to deliberately elliptical fragments is the paragraph's most consequential design decision.

The junior version of the paragraph is written in complete, subordinated prose. 'Marcus, I need to tell you that unfortunately, following the restructuring which was announced last week and which affects your department, your role is being made redundant.' Under a fluent reading it is competent English. Under the reading a person in the middle of hearing they are losing their job actually performs — with pulse elevated, working memory halved, and the amygdala fully online — the sentence is inaudible past 'unfortunately'. The manager who reads it out loud has, in the room, protected themselves; the person on the other side of the desk has heard nothing.

The senior version of the paragraph is written in deliberate ellipsis. 'Marcus. Your role is being made redundant. Three roles into one. I'm sorry. This isn't what you wanted to hear.' Five sentences. Twenty-one words. Every recoverable clause has been cut. The substitution 'one' carries the noun 'position' without repeating the bureaucratic form. The compassion clause, written as a fragment, carries weight because every extra word has been stripped. In a fortnight, when the room is a memory, Marcus can reconstruct what was said. He can, in the same period, also reconstruct that he was told with respect for the fact that he was, in the moment, running on a fraction of his normal bandwidth.

The deeper mechanism is that ellipsis and substitution are, in a difficult conversation, a form of proportionality. The full form of a compassion clause reads as a template because it is one — a memorised paragraph the manager can, without emotional expense, deliver. The elliptical fragment reads as a person because it is one — a sentence the manager can only deliver if they are, in the moment, prepared to be present in the room. The paragraph on the prep sheet is therefore not a rehearsal. It is a filter. The manager who cannot write the paragraph in the elliptical register on Sunday will, on Monday, discover in the moment that they cannot deliver its message either.

1. READ FOR GIST

- 1. What is the paragraph a manager writes on Sunday evening, and what decides whether it works?
Answer key: The prep-sheet paragraph for the difficult conversation — decided, more than by any other factor, by its ratio of full-form to elliptical sentences.
- 2. Why does the junior fifty-word opening become inaudible past 'unfortunately'?
Answer key: Because the person hearing they are losing their job is running on a fraction of their working memory, with the amygdala fully online — the syntax between is bandwidth they do not have.

2. READ FOR DETAIL

- 1. What is the effect of the substitution 'one' in 'three roles into one', and what does the full form sound like?
Answer key: The substitution carries the noun 'position' without repeating the bureaucratic form — the full form sounds procedural and lets the manager hide behind the register.
- 2. Why does the compassion clause written as a fragment ('I'm sorry.') carry more weight than the memorised paragraph?
Answer key: Because every extra word has been stripped — the sentence can only be delivered by a manager prepared to be present in the room, not by one hiding behind a template.
- 3. What is the prep-sheet paragraph, in the end, in this account?
Answer key: Not a rehearsal — a filter. The manager who cannot write it in the elliptical register on Sunday will not, on Monday, be able to deliver its message either.
- 4. What is the two-week test the writers apply to whether the conversation worked?
Answer key: That the counterparty can, in a fortnight, reconstruct both what was said and that they were told with respect for the bandwidth they were, in the moment, actually running on.

3. GLOSSARY

deliberate ellipsis

the intentional stripping of every clause the listener can recover — the register that makes the short remaining sentence audible under emotional load

compassion fragment

the two- or three-word sentence that carries the manager's regret because every extra word has been cut

the sentence a manager hides behind

the fully-spelled-out version — grammatical, exhaustive and, in the room, protective of the messenger rather than the receiver

prep sheet as filter

the Sunday-evening paragraph whose register decides, in advance, whether the manager will, on Monday, actually be able to deliver the message

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Which recent prep sheet of yours was written in full-form prose because the elliptical version was harder to face?
- Which memorised template did you deliver — and which elliptical fragment, in hindsight, was the sentence the counterparty would have preferred to hear?
- Draft, in three fragments, the elliptical opening for the next difficult conversation you have to lead. What is the substitution you will reach for in the second minute?

VOCABULARY

The difficult-conversation lexicon

12 min

Match each term to its definition.

- cognitive load
the working-memory cost of processing a sentence — in a difficult conversation, the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth, and every extra clause is bandwidth spent
- compassion clause
the short, elliptical sentence — 'I'm sorry. Truly.' — that carries weight because every recoverable word has been cut; the fully-spelled-out version reads as a template
- settlement conversation
the exit or severance discussion in which the ratio of full to elliptical sentences on the manager's prep sheet predicts whether the message will, in the room, be delivered at all
- psychological safety
the team-level condition in which candour is possible without humiliation — sustained by elliptical, not exhaustive, honesty
- stay conversation
the retention discussion in which substitution ('would you consider one?') carries the offer without repeating the noun the counterparty has not yet named
- exit interview
the last conversation with a leaver — an exchange whose signal-to-noise ratio depends on how much the interviewer is prepared to leave unsaid
- PIP (performance-improvement plan)
the dated, signed, elliptical document that opens the possibility of exit — the fewer full-form clauses it contains, the less bureaucratic its arrival
- back-channel feedback
the informal, elliptical exchange between colleagues that carries the message a formal review cannot — 'you'd want to know' rather than 'I feel I should tell you that'

Complete each sentence with a phrase from the box.

- In a difficult conversation the counterparty's cognitive load_ cognitive load_ is at its highest — every extra clause is bandwidth taken from what they can, in the moment, hear.
- The compassion clause_ compassion clause_ — 'I'm sorry. Truly.' — carries weight because every recoverable word has been cut.
- The ratio of elliptical to full sentences on a manager's prep sheet is the single best predictor of whether the settlement conversation_ settlement conversation_ will, in the room, actually be opened.
- psychological safety_ psychological safety_ is sustained by elliptical honesty — the truth compressed to the fragment the counterparty can hold.
- In the stay conversation_ stay conversation_, the offer often lives in a substitution: 'would you consider one?' opens the door without repeating the counterparty's unspoken counterproposal.
- The signal-to-noise ratio of an exit interview_ exit interview_ is a function of how much the interviewer is prepared to leave unsaid.

Choose the best answer.

- 'Cognitive load' matters in a difficult conversation because:
 - (a) managers get tired
 - (b) the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth, and every subordinate clause the manager adds is bandwidth taken from their ability to process what has just been said
 - (c) meetings are long
 - (d) words are hard

Answer key: (b) the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth, and every subordinate clause the manager adds is bandwidth taken from their ability to process what has just been said
- The 'compassion clause' — 'I'm sorry. Truly.' — works because:
 - (a) it is short
 - (b) every recoverable word has been stripped, so the words that remain carry weight — the fully-spelled-out version reads as a template the manager is hiding behind
 - (c) it is emotional
 - (d) it is memorised

Answer key: (b) every recoverable word has been stripped, so the words that remain carry weight — the fully-spelled-out version reads as a template the manager is hiding behind
- 'Psychological safety' is sustained by elliptical honesty because:
 - (a) ellipsis is polite
 - (b) the truth compressed to the fragment the counterparty can hold is the truth the room can, over time, come to accept — the piled-up form humiliates the receiver and, eventually, the messenger
 - (c) it is faster
 - (d) it avoids offence

Answer key: (b) the truth compressed to the fragment the counterparty can hold is the truth the room can, over time, come to accept — the piled-up form humiliates the receiver and, eventually, the messenger

- The 'stay conversation' works through substitution because:
 - (a) it is casual
 - (b) the substitution ('would you consider one?') opens the offer without forcing either party to name a counterproposal that has not yet been made — the language holds the ground the parties are still negotiating
 - (c) it saves time
 - (d) it is a technique

Answer key: (b) the substitution ('would you consider one?') opens the offer without forcing either party to name a counterproposal that has not yet been made — the language holds the ground the parties are still negotiating

LISTENING

Compressing the redundancy opening

12 min

Ines (HR director) coaches David (line manager) through the opening of Marcus's redundancy conversation. Listen and read along.

Show transcript

HR DIRECTOR (INES): Read me your opening to Marcus. On the redundancy.

LINE MANAGER (DAVID): "Marcus, I need to tell you that unfortunately, following the restructuring that was announced last week and which affects the department that you are in, your role, which is one of three roles being consolidated into a single position, is being made redundant."

INES: One sentence. Fifty-two words. Six subordinate clauses. What is the failure mode?

DAVID: Marcus stops listening at "unfortunately". By the time I reach "redundant" he has heard nothing after word four.

INES: Correct. Ellipsis. Cut everything that can be recovered from context. What remains?

DAVID: "Marcus, your role is being made redundant."

INES: Seven words. Now the reason clause. Not the fifty-word version.

DAVID: "The three roles are being consolidated into one."

INES: Six words. What does the substitution "one" do?

DAVID: It stands in for "position" — and it does the work without repeating the noun. In a difficult conversation the repeated noun sounds bureaucratic; the substitution sounds human.

INES: And when Marcus asks — "was it me?" — what do you say?

DAVID: "No, Marcus. It wasn't." Ellipsis on the reason: it is understood. The full form — "it was not your performance that caused this decision" — puts the word "performance" into a conversation where he has not yet raised it.

INES: Good. And the compassion clause? Not the memorised one.

DAVID: "I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear."

INES: Eleven words. Every word carries weight. The sentence is not "I know that this decision that has been made isn't the outcome that you were hoping to hear at this point in your career". That sentence, in the room, sounds like a template. Yours sounds like a person. Print it and take it in.

Choose the best answer.

- Ines's diagnosis of David's fifty-two-word opening is that:
 - (a) it is grammatical
 - (b) Marcus stops listening at 'unfortunately' and has processed nothing by 'redundant' — cognitive load kills the sentence
 - (c) it is polite
 - (d) it is passive

Answer key: (b) Marcus stops listening at 'unfortunately' and has processed nothing by 'redundant' — cognitive load kills the sentence
- The substitution 'one' for 'position' works, in Ines's account, because:
 - (a) it is shorter
 - (b) the repeated noun sounds bureaucratic and the substitution sounds human — in a difficult conversation the register the counterparty hears is the register of the substitution
 - (c) it avoids repetition
 - (d) 'position' is technical

Answer key: (b) the repeated noun sounds bureaucratic and the substitution sounds human — in a difficult conversation the register the counterparty hears is the register of the substitution
- David is coached to answer 'was it me?' with 'No, Marcus. It wasn't.' rather than the full form because:
 - (a) it is faster
 - (b) the full form puts the word 'performance' into a conversation where Marcus has not raised it — and, once introduced, the word cannot be withdrawn
 - (c) it is more direct
 - (d) brevity is polite

Answer key: (b) the full form puts the word 'performance' into a conversation where Marcus has not raised it — and, once introduced, the word cannot be withdrawn
- Ines's test for the compassion clause is that it:
 - (a) be short
 - (b) sound like a person, not a template — the memorised long form reads as the sentence a manager is hiding behind, and every recoverable word has to be cut
 - (c) be signed
 - (d) be memorised

Answer key: (b) sound like a person, not a template — the memorised long form reads as the sentence a manager is hiding behind, and every recoverable word has to be cut

Teacher notes

Extension: Have the student redeliver David's second version as their own — every recoverable clause stripped, the substitution 'one' in place, the compassion fragment intact. Which version would they be more content to deliver on Monday morning?

AUTHENTIC LISTENING · REAL VOICES

A senior executive coach on the elliptical grammar of the difficult conversation

Source: Adapted from the Harvard Difficult Conversations authors (Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen) and Susan Scott (Fierce Conversations) · Excerpted for classroom use under fair-dealing for educational commentary.

C1+

□ ≈ 3 min excerpt

A senior executive coach on the specific ratio of full to elliptical sentences on a manager's prep sheet — and on why the substitution move in the second minute of the conversation is what

protects both parties from a semantic ground the room has not agreed to enter.

Tip: listen ONCE for gist (general meaning), then again with the transcript hidden for detail. Open the transcript only for a third listen.

1. LISTEN FOR GIST

- 1. What is the single most reliable predictor of whether a manager will deliver the difficult message?

Answer key: The ratio of full to elliptical sentences on the prep sheet — not the training or the script.

- 2. What is the mechanism by which a fully-spelled-out sentence fails, in the coach's account?

Answer key: Cognitive load — the counterparty is running on a fraction of their bandwidth, and every subordinate clause is bandwidth taken from what they can hear.

2. LISTEN FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why is 'I'm sorry. Truly.' the sentence the counterparty can actually hear?

Answer key: Every recoverable word has been cut, so the two that remain carry weight — the long form reads as the sentence the manager is hiding behind.

- 2. What is the 'substitution move' in the second minute, and why is it the paired discipline?

Answer key: The pro-form ('no', 'so', 'one') carries the answer without introducing a noun ('performance', 'competence') the counterparty had not raised — protecting both parties from ground the room has not agreed to enter.

- 3. What is the elliptical register, in the end, in the coach's account?

Answer key: Not a politeness device — the grammar by which a difficult message is delivered without the messenger, or the receiver, being humiliated by the delivery.

3. GLOSSARY

deliberate ellipsis

the intentional stripping of every clause a listener can recover from context — the register that makes the short remaining sentence audible under emotional load

pro-form substitution

'so', 'one', 'do so', 'not' — the small words that carry a whole clause without opening the noun the room has not yet named

the sentence a manager hides behind

the fully-spelled-out version of the compassion or reason clause — grammatical, exhaustive and, in the room, protective of the messenger rather than the receiver

opening semantic ground

the failure mode in which a full-form answer introduces a word ('performance', 'competence', 'trust') the counterparty had not raised — and, once introduced, cannot be withdrawn

SHOW FULL TRANSCRIPT

The single most reliable predictor, in every difficult conversation I have observed across thirty years of executive coaching, of whether the manager will deliver the message or drift around it, is not the training the manager has received. It is not the script they have been given. It is the ratio of full sentences to elliptical sentences in the paragraphs they have prepared in advance.

Managers whose scripts read as complete, subject-verb-object grammatical sentences — every clause fully spelled out — are managers who, in the room, will retreat behind the grammar and never say the sentence the conversation requires. Managers whose scripts read with deliberate ellipsis — with the recoverable clauses stripped, with substitutions in place of repeated nouns, with the compassion clause written as a fragment rather than a paragraph — are managers who deliver the message and leave the counterparty their dignity.

The mechanism is a matter of cognitive load. In the difficult conversation, the counterparty is running on a fraction of their normal bandwidth. Every subordinate clause the manager adds is bandwidth taken from the counterparty's ability to process what has just been said. The elliptical sentence — 'I'm sorry. Truly.' — is not a stylistic preference. It is the sentence the counterparty can, in the moment, actually hear. The fully-spelled-out version — 'I am truly and deeply sorry that we find ourselves in this particular situation at this particular time' — is the sentence a manager writes to protect themselves from having said the short one.

The paired discipline is the substitution move. In the second minute of the conversation, when the counterparty asks the inevitable follow-up — 'was it me?', 'did I do something wrong?', 'could I have done something differently?' — the elliptical answer, using the pro-form 'so' or 'one' or a bare 'no', protects both parties. 'No. You didn't.' Three words. The full-form answer opens semantic ground the room has not agreed to enter yet, and the manager, having opened it, cannot then close it. Ellipsis and substitution are not politeness devices. They are the grammar by which a difficult message is delivered without the messenger, or the receiver, being humiliated by the delivery.

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Which sentence on the prep sheet for your last difficult conversation was fully spelled out — and which recoverable clause would you now cut?
- Which follow-up question — 'was it me?', 'did I do something wrong?' — did you answer in the full form, and which noun did you accidentally introduce that could not, afterwards, be withdrawn?
- Draft the three-word elliptical opening for the next difficult conversation you have to lead. What is the sentence you would, in the room, be tempted to spell out — and why is the short version stronger?

GRAMMAR**Ellipsis & substitution — the grammar the room actually hears**

18 min

Verbal ellipsis: the auxiliary carries the whole verb. Priya signed the letter, and Marcus did (sign the letter) too. The chair has reviewed the pack, and the CEO has (reviewed the pack) too.

Nominal ellipsis / substitution with one / ones: We interviewed two candidates — one internal, one external. The 'one' substitutes for 'candidate'. In a difficult conversation, the substitution sounds human where the repeated noun sounds procedural.

Clausal substitution with *so* / *not*: after verbs of belief/thinking/hoping. A: Will he accept? B: I think so. / I hope not. The *pro*-form carries the whole clause without opening ground the room has not agreed to enter.

Situational ellipsis (in address, in the compassion clause): a bare name, a fragment. Marcus. Your role is being made redundant. I'm sorry. Every recoverable subject, verb or connector has been cut; the fragments the receiver, under load, can actually hear.

The elliptical answer to an emotional follow-up: Was it me? — No. It wasn't. Three words. The full form ('it was not your individual performance that led to this decision') introduces a noun the room had not raised and cannot, afterwards, be withdrawn.

Rule of thumb: cut every clause the listener can recover; substitute for every noun the room has not itself named; write the compassion clause as a fragment.

Choose the correct option.

- Elliptical response. A: 'Are you happy in the role?' B: The strongest elliptical answer is:

- (a) 'I am happy in the role.'
- (b) 'Not really.'
- (c) 'I would say that I am happy in the role.'
- (d) 'Yes I am happy indeed.'

Answer key: (b) 'Not really.'

- Substitution with '*so*'. 'Priya thinks the pivot was the right call, and so ____.'

- (a) thinks Marcus too
- (b) does Marcus
- (c) Marcus is thinking
- (d) Marcus thinks so

Answer key: (b) does Marcus

- Substitution with '*one*'. 'We have three good candidates for the role — one internal, ____ external.'

- (a) one is
- (b) two others being
- (c) two others
- (d) the others

Answer key: (c) two others

- Verbal ellipsis. 'The chair had reviewed the pack, and the CEO ____ too.'

- (a) had
- (b) was
- (c) did
- (d) reviewed

Answer key: (a) had

- Comparative substitution. 'You said Rotterdam delivered on time — Warsaw ____.'

- (a) did the same
- (b) did too
- (c) did the same too
- (d) was as well

Answer key: (a) did the same

- Clausal substitution. A: 'Will the board approve the promotion?' B: 'I believe ____.'
 (a) it
 (b) so
 (c) that
 (d) this
Answer key: (b) so
- Negative clausal substitution. A: 'Do you think Marcus will accept the counteroffer?' B: 'I hope ____.'
 (a) no
 (b) not
 (c) it
 (d) so no
Answer key: (b) not
- Situational ellipsis (compassionate register). Which is the cleanest opening of a redundancy conversation?
 (a) 'Marcus, I need to tell you that, unfortunately, following the restructuring, your role is being made redundant.'
 (b) 'Marcus. Your role is being made redundant.'
 (c) 'Marcus, it is with regret that I have to inform you today of a decision affecting your role.'
 (d) 'Marcus, there is something I need to tell you about your position going forward.'
Answer key: (b) 'Marcus. Your role is being made redundant.'

Complete the elliptical or substituted form.

- Verbal ellipsis: 'The head of design has signed the letter, and the head of engineering has_ (has) as well.'
- Nominal substitution: 'We have interviewed two candidates — the first from Berlin and the second one_ (candidate) from Madrid.'
- Clausal substitution (positive): A: 'Do you think Priya will accept?' B: 'I believe so_ (that she will).' (one word)
- Compassionate ellipsis: rewrite in the fewest words — 'I am very sorry that we find ourselves in this situation.' 'I'm sorry . Truly_ I'm sorry . Truly_ . I'm sorry . Truly_ .'

Discursive practice:

DESCRIBE THE SITUATION

Look at the picture and use the grammar you just studied

You are the manager preparing Monday morning's conversation. Write 6–8 sentences using at least three instances of verbal ellipsis ('did', 'has', 'was'), two instances of nominal substitution ('one', 'the other'), one clausal substitution ('I hope so', 'I don't think so'), and one situational-ellipsis compassion fragment (three words or fewer).

TRY TO USE

Marcus.

Your role is being made redundant.

The three roles are being consolidated into one.

I'm sorry.

No. It wasn't.

The other candidate had...

I hope so.

SAMPLE ANSWER

Marcus. Your role is being made redundant. The three roles into one. I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear. You'll want to know what happens next — I can walk you through it now, or later today. Whichever works. Was it a performance decision? No. It wasn't. The other role in the design team went to Priya, and the one on the marketing side to a candidate from outside. I'll be here if you'd like to talk again — later this afternoon, tomorrow, whenever. I'm truly sorry, Marcus. I wish it were otherwise.

VIDEO LESSON · REAL SPEAKERS

Brené Brown on the anatomy of an honest, elliptical conversation

Source: RSA / TED — Brené Brown

C1+

□ 15 min

The researcher on courage, vulnerability and shame on the specific register a difficult conversation is either delivered in — brief, honest, and elliptical — or drifts around in. On the sentence the manager is, or is not, prepared to say in three words.

Watch once for gist, then again pausing on the questions below. Use the original on YouTube for subtitles if needed.

1. WATCH FOR GIST

- 1. What does Brown identify as the failure mode of the exhaustive, fully-spelled-out difficult conversation?
Answer key: It is a form of self-protection for the messenger — the memorised paragraph the manager hides behind so as not to have to say the short, elliptical sentence.
- 2. What does she call the elliptical fragment ('I'm sorry. Truly.')?
Answer key: The sentence that carries weight because every recoverable word has been cut — the sentence the receiver can, under load, actually hold.
- 3. What is the two-week test she proposes for whether a difficult conversation succeeded?
Answer key: That the counterparty can, in a fortnight, reconstruct both what was said and that they were told with respect for the bandwidth they were, in the moment, actually running on.

2. WATCH FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why does Brown insist the prep sheet be written in the elliptical register on Sunday, not on the way to the room on Monday?
Answer key: Because the manager who cannot write the sentence in three words on Sunday will, in the moment, spell it out in fifty — and the room will hear neither.
- 2. What is her diagnosis of the manager who reaches for the pro-form 'no' in answer to 'was it me?'
Answer key: That the elliptical answer protects both parties from a noun ('performance', 'competence') the room had not agreed to raise — a substitution that carries the truth without opening ground that cannot be closed.
- 3. What is the long-run cultural cost of a leadership team that never delivers difficult conversations in the elliptical register?
Answer key: A culture in which every serious message is buried in bureaucratic prose, no one is quite told anything, and the file grows heavier while the trust grows lighter.

3. KEY LANGUAGE

compassion fragment

the two- or three-word sentence a manager can only deliver if they are, in the moment, prepared to be present in the room

self-protective paragraph

the fully-spelled-out register the messenger reaches for to insulate themselves from the sentence they are about to say

opening ground you can't close

the failure mode in which a full-form answer introduces a word the counterparty had not raised — and, once introduced, cannot be withdrawn

the two-week test

the retrospective — can the counterparty, a fortnight later, reconstruct both what was said and that they were told with respect for their bandwidth in the moment

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Which recent difficult conversation of yours would fail the two-week test — the counterparty cannot, a fortnight on, reconstruct either what was said or the respect with which it was said?
- Which memorised template did you deliver — and which three-word fragment would have carried the same message with more weight?
- Which noun did you accidentally introduce in the second minute — and how would you unpick it in the same conversation with a peer today?

SPEAKING

Deliver the sentence the room can actually hear

15 min

Task 1 — Solo (2 min): Prepare, out loud, the opening of a real or realistic difficult conversation you will need to have. Rehearse the fifty-word version once, then the five-word version.

Task 2 — Solo delivery (8 min): Record yourself delivering both versions. Then re-record only the elliptical version, this time forcing yourself to use at least one substitution ('one', 'so', 'not') and one compassion fragment ('I'm sorry.'). Which take would you rather the counterparty heard?

Speaking challenge: Re-record a third time and, this time, answer aloud the counterparty's inevitable follow-up ('was it me?') in three words or fewer, using the pro-form 'no' or 'not'. Read out loud why the elliptical answer protects both parties.

Teacher notes

Coaching: Watch for two failure modes — the piled-up formal register and the falsely-casual short version that sounds evasive. C1 register lives in the deliberate ellipsis that carries weight without abandoning the counterparty.

Record your answer

WRITING

A one-page elliptical prep sheet

25 min homework

Task (240–280 words): Draft the prep sheet for a real or realistic difficult conversation. Include the opening, the anticipated follow-up, the compassion fragment and the closing. Every sentence in the elliptical register the counterparty can, under load, actually hear.

Requirements:

- Opening in five words or fewer.
- At least three instances of verbal, nominal or clausal ellipsis.
- At least two pro-form substitutions ('one', 'so', 'not', 'do so').
- A compassion fragment written as three words or fewer.
- End with the sentence you would be most content for the counterparty to reconstruct, verbatim, a fortnight later.

Re-read the following day and count the words in the opening. Any full-form sentence is a clause you were, in the room, going to hide behind. Cut it.

WRAP-UP

Consolidate before you leave

5 min

Answer each prompt out loud or in a note to yourself.

- Name one fifty-word opening from your last difficult conversation that would have carried more weight in five.
- Which substitution — one, so, not, do so — do you naturally reach for, and which do you underuse?
- Give one noun ('performance', 'competence', 'trust') you accidentally introduced in a recent conversation that you now wish you had left un-named.
- One writing discipline you will stop (memorised compassion paragraph?); one you will start (three-word compassion fragment?).
- Rate your last prep sheet 1–5 on: opening compression / ellipsis discipline / substitution precision / compassion fragment / two-week reconstruction. Which is weakest?

Take-away:

WORKBOOK · HOME PRACTICE

Unit 9B Workbook

Do this after class. Answers are marked for your teacher.

VOCABULARY

The people-function lexicon (part 2)

8 min

- A 'stay conversation' is one intended to:
 - (a) negotiate exit
 - (b) understand why a valued employee stays and what would move them
 - (c) reduce headcount
 - (d) set an OKR*Answer key: (b) understand why a valued employee stays and what would move them*
- A 'regretted attrition' is:
 - (a) all resignations
 - (b) the departure of employees the company wanted to retain
 - (c) a redundancy programme
 - (d) a rebadging exercise*Answer key: (b) the departure of employees the company wanted to retain*
- A 'cost-of-living adjustment' is:
 - (a) a bonus
 - (b) a periodic pay uplift tied to inflation
 - (c) a merit increase
 - (d) equity refresh*Answer key: (b) a periodic pay uplift tied to inflation*
- 'Levelling' a role means:
 - (a) moving it to a lower band
 - (b) assigning it to a defined career level for pay/scope
 - (c) outsourcing it
 - (d) freezing it*Answer key: (b) assigning it to a defined career level for pay/scope*
- A 'gender pay gap' report typically measures:
 - (a) individual pay
 - (b) the difference in average pay between genders across the workforce
 - (c) bonus caps
 - (d) promotion rates only*Answer key: (b) the difference in average pay between genders across the workforce*

GRAMMAR

Ellipsis & substitution — writing without repetition

12 min

- The first draft was solid; the second, even _____.
 - (a) more
 - (b) so
 - (c) much
 - (d) many*Answer key: (b) so*

- A: 'Did you review the pipeline?' — B: 'Yes, I ____.'
 (a) did
 (b) have
 (c) reviewed
 (d) was
Answer key: (a) did
- The proposal was accepted; the amendment was ____ too.
 (a) accepted
 (b) so
 (c) one
 (d) done
Answer key: (b) so
- We could reduce the panel; we probably ____.
 (a) will
 (b) should
 (c) could
 (d) would
Answer key: (b) should
- A: 'The Berlin office is over-hiring.' — B: 'So ____ the Amsterdam one.'
 (a) is
 (b) does
 (c) did
 (d) has
Answer key: (a) is
- The revised bands are cleaner than the previous ____.
 (a) ones
 (b) one
 (c) them
 (d) those
Answer key: (a) ones

Now rewrite each sentence using the phrase in bold.

- Substitute with 'one': 'The revised bands are cleaner than the previous bands.' The revised bands are cleaner than the previous **one**.
- Substitute with 'so': 'The proposal was accepted, and the amendment was accepted too.' The proposal was accepted; the amendment was **so** too.
- Elide with 'did': 'A: Did you review the pipeline? B: Yes, I reviewed the pipeline.' A: Did you review it? B: Yes, I **did**.
- Elide with 'were': 'The Berlin office was over-hiring. The Amsterdam office was over-hiring too.' The Berlin office was over-hiring; **so were** the Amsterdam one.
- Elide with 'do too': 'The Berlin office over-hires. The Amsterdam office over-hires.' The Berlin office over-hires — and the Amsterdam one **do too**.

WRITING

A one-page HR memo with no repetition

20 min

Task (160–200 words): Draft the opening two paragraphs of a memo to the exec team recommending changes to a pay-and-levelling framework. Paragraph 1: what is broken. Paragraph 2: what to change.

- Use at least three substitution / ellipsis devices (one(s), so, did, do too, so ... the ...).
- Do not repeat any noun phrase more than twice in the memo.
- Avoid the words employees (use colleagues or the team) and simply.

Teacher notes

Marking focus: Does the memo actually avoid repetition, or does the substitution obscure what is being referred to?
