APEX ENGLISH

Your voice. Global.

B2 · BUSINESS ENGLISH

UNIT 4 · B4B

Describing trends

Theme · Numbers & Trends

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Describing trends

Theme: Numbers & Trends

Learning objectives

- Describe a chart clearly in under 90 seconds — the shape, the story, the ask.
- Use zero, first and second conditionals to talk about forecasts and levers.
- Use collocations with grow, fall, plateau and rebound to sound native — not translated.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Class Book

Warm-up · Draw the shape

On a scrap of paper (or a napkin), sketch — in 60 seconds — the shape of ONE number from your work over the last 12 months. No axis labels. Then out loud: describe the shape in 3 sentences without using the word 'good' or 'bad'.

Name the SHAPE first (climb / plateau / dip / spike / rebound), then the numbers.

Say WHERE the inflection point is ('it broke in March…').

Say WHY, in one sentence, or say 'we don't know why yet'.

If you catch yourself saying 'it's been quite good overall', start again.

Lead-in: name the shape

Match each chart shape to the collocation.

1. Line rises steadily every month.

---

2. Line rockets from 100 to 900, then holds.

---

3. Line drops sharply, then climbs back.

---

4. One month sits far above the rest.

---

followUp: Which shape matches a number in YOUR work right now?

Reading: The chart-walkthrough that lands

A chart is not a decoration. It is a sentence with a picture attached. If the picture and the sentence say different things, the room stops trusting you. So the trick to walking someone through a chart is to say the sentence FIRST, in plain English, before you point at anything.

Try this shape: 'The story is this — X grew by Y between month A and month B, then plateaued when we changed Z. If we hold the current spend, we'll flat-line at this level. If we double the ad budget, based on the last two campaigns, we'll grow another 12–15%. That's the ask.' Notice the conditionals doing the work: zero and first conditionals for the levers ('if we hold X, we get Y'), turning the chart from a picture into a decision.

One collocation trap: 'the numbers went up a lot'. That is a translation, not a description. In English, numbers GROW, RISE, CLIMB, SURGE, SPIKE, DOUBLE, TRIPLE — and they FALL, DROP, DIP, SLIDE, SLUMP, PLUNGE. They can PLATEAU, FLAT-LINE, HOLD STEADY, or REBOUND. Use those verbs and the shape appears in the listener's head; use 'go up a lot' and it stays a fuzzy blob.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. The main job of a chart in a business meeting is to…
   (A) Look nice
   (B) Support a specific plain-English sentence
   (C) Prove you can use Excel
2. The 'ask' in a chart-walkthrough is…
   (A) A question you ask the room
   (B) The decision you want the room to make
   (C) The chart title
3. 'If we double the ad budget, we'll grow another 12–15%.' — which conditional?
   (A) Zero
   (B) First
   (C) Second
4. 'The numbers went up a lot' is criticised because…
   (A) It's grammatically wrong
   (B) It's a fuzzy translation — the shape doesn't appear in the listener's head
   (C) It's too formal

Vocabulary in context — trend collocations

Match the verb / phrase to the shape it describes.

surge — rise very fast and steeply

plateau — flatten and stay at roughly the same level

rebound — fall and then recover to (near) the previous level

slump — fall sharply and stay down for a while

flat-line — show no meaningful change over time

double / triple — grow by 100% / 200%

Vocabulary: verbs of change, shapes and hedges

trend upward / ascend — generic 'up'

climb steadily — slow, consistent up

surge / spike — fast, steep up (spike suggests short-lived)

double / triple — grow by exactly 100% / 200%

rebound / recover — return towards the previous level after a fall

trend downward / decline — generic 'down'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

slide / slip — small, gradual down

plunge / plummet — fast, steep down

slump — drop sharply and stay down

halve — fall by exactly 50%

plateau / flat-line — stop changing meaningfully

hold steady — stay at the current level on purpose

fluctuate — move up and down without a clear direction

seasonal pattern — predictable annual peaks and troughs

outlier — the data point that doesn't fit

practice

Complete each sentence with ONE word / phrase from the pool above.

1. Sign-ups ___ in the first week of the campaign — from 200 a day to almost 900.

2. Cancellations ___ steadily every month between April and August.

3. Revenue ___ in Q1 after the outage, then ___ once the fixes shipped.

4. Web traffic ___ around a level of 40k sessions/week for the whole quarter.

5. Ignore the Black Friday week — it's an ___.

6. Our headcount has ___ from 20 to 40 in twelve months.

Practice 2 — collocations & rewrite

Rewrite each sentence replacing the underlined phrase with ONE word/expression from this lesson's vocabulary. Keep the meaning identical.

1. Sign-ups <u>went up very fast and steeply</u> in the first week of the campaign.

2. Cancellations <u>went up slowly and consistently</u> every month between April and August.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

3. Revenue <u>fell sharply and stayed down</u> after the outage, then recovered once the fixes shipped.

4. Web traffic <u>stopped changing meaningfully</u> around 40k sessions/week for the whole quarter.

5. Ignore the Black Friday week — it's <u>a data point that doesn't fit the pattern</u>.

Practice 3 — discursive writing (business memo)

prompt: Draft a two-paragraph memo to the CEO explaining last quarter's revenue trend chart and recommending a specific investment lever.

Use at least FOUR of the target expressions from this unit.

Adopt a professional register: concise, structured, executive-friendly.

Include a clear recommendation or takeaway in the final sentence.

sample: Subject: Q3 Revenue Trend — Recommendation The story is this: monthly revenue climbed steadily from €3.1m to €4.0m between April and July, then plateaued once we paused the ad campaign. One December week spiked to €5.2m, but that's an outlier — a single enterprise contract closed early — and shouldn't shape our forecast. If we hold current spend, we'll flat-line around €4.0m through year-end. If we doubled the ad budget, based on the last two campaigns, we'd likely grow another 12–15%, though returns may diminish. My recommendation: reinstate the campaign at 1.5× the prior budget for Q4, targeting a rebound to €4.6m by December, and review weekly to catch any slump early.

Grammar focus: Conditionals for forecasting

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. Zero conditional — general truth / rule of the business — Form: If + present, present. Use for things that always happen in your business. • 'If we cut ad spend by 20%, sign-ups drop about 15% within two weeks.' • 'If churn goes above 5%, ARR growth flat-lines regardless of new sales.'

2. First conditional — real, likely future — Form: If + present, will / going to + verb. Use for realistic forecasts and levers. • 'If we hold the current spend, we'll flat-line at €5.4m.' • 'If the November renewal closes, we're going to beat plan.' • Softer: 'we should / we're likely to / on plan we'll'.

3. Second conditional — hypothetical / less likely — Form: If + past simple, would + verb. Use for 'what if' scenarios you don't fully believe in. • 'If we doubled the ad budget tomorrow, we'd probably grow another 15% — but I wouldn't recommend it.' • 'If churn halved, we'd hit €7m without touching sales.'

4. Common trap — 'will' inside the if-clause — 'If we will grow, we hire' ✗ — never use will after IF (in first conditional). Say 'If we grow, we'll hire.' The FUTURE lives in the main clause, not the if-clause.

Exercise A — Zero, first or second?

Choose the best conditional for each situation.

1. A general rule: cutting ad spend 20% → sign-ups down ~15% within 2 weeks.

2. A realistic Q4 plan: if the pipeline holds, we beat plan.

3. A hypothetical: if the market crashed tomorrow, what would we do?

4. A lever you don't recommend: doubling ad budget tomorrow → +15%, but risky.

Exercise B — Fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE grammar error. Rewrite it.

1. If we will grow 20%, we hire two more engineers.

2. If we cut prices, sign-ups going up.

3. If we would double the ad budget, we would grow 15%.

4. If the November deal closes, we would beat plan.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise C — Chart-and-lever

For each chart situation, write ONE first-conditional sentence (the base case) AND ONE second-conditional sentence (a lever you're NOT pulling).

1. ARR is flat-lining at €4.2m. Base case = do nothing. Lever = re-price the top 20 accounts.

2. Churn is climbing from 3% to 4.5%. Base case = keep the current onboarding. Lever = rebuild onboarding.

3. Demo bookings surged 40% after the podcast. Base case = same podcast cadence. Lever = triple podcast spend.

Listening: three chart-walkthroughs

Three managers walk you through the same chart: churn climbing from 3% to 4.5% over six months. You have to pick ONE to present to the CEO on Monday.

pre

Which manager do you predict will win the slot — and what will win it?

What is ONE phrase you're allergic to hearing in a chart-walkthrough?

gist

1. Which manager wins the slot, and why?

2. Which manager buries the story in adjectives?

3. Which manager is fluent but overcommits?

detail

1. What is Voice B's exact baseline → current number?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. What conditional does Voice B use for the ask?

3. What second-conditional lever does Voice B mention but NOT recommend?

Third listen — chart craft

Focus on HOW each manager walks the chart. Answer from what they DO, not just what they say.

1. Voice B says the sentence BEFORE pointing at the chart. What work does that order do?

2. Voice A never names the SHAPE. What effect does that have?

3. Voice C promises 'under 2%'. Why does that hurt his credibility, not help it?

Language from the audio — chart-walkthrough moves

Match each phrase to what it DOES.

"The story is this — churn climbed from 3 to 4.5 over six months." — sentence first, chart second — punchline before picture

"If we fund the onboarding rebuild, we'll bring it back under 3%." — first conditional — realistic lever + likely outcome

"If we halved prices tomorrow, we'd stop the bleeding — but we'd gut the margin." — second conditional — hypothetical lever we're NOT pulling

"Ignore the December spike — it's an outlier, one enterprise contract ended." — distinguishes signal from noise

"That's the ask: one engineer full-time for six weeks." — converts a chart into a decision the room can make

"Under 2% is the stretch, not the commit." — separates promise from ambition

Voice A (Priya): So what you're seeing here is a concerning trajectory. Frankly, the meaningful degradation over the trailing six-month window represents non-trivial exposure, particularly in the mid-market cohort. It's a trend we're watching closely and I'd like to open it up for discussion.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Voice B (Rafael): The story is this — monthly churn climbed steadily from 3.0 to 4.5% over six months. That's about 50% up. It started when we deprecated the old onboarding in March; it hasn't recovered. If we fund the onboarding rebuild — one engineer, six weeks — we'll bring it back under 3% by year-end. If we halved prices tomorrow, we'd stop the bleeding, but we'd also gut the margin. So the ask is the engineer, not the price cut. Under 2% is the stretch, not the commit. Ignore the December spike — it's an outlier, one enterprise contract ended.

Voice C (Danny): Yeah, so churn's up, but honestly I'm confident. We've got a bunch of ideas — better onboarding, better pricing, we're brainstorming a lot of stuff. Give us the quarter and we'll definitely bring it back under 2%, no question.

Speaking: solo role-play — 90-second chart-walkthrough

Solo task. Pick ONE chart from your real work (or the flat-line / spike / rebound examples from lead-in). Record yourself (voice note, up to 90 seconds) walking the chart. You MUST include: (1) the SHAPE named in one word, (2) baseline → current + when, (3) one first-conditional (base case + lever), (4) one second-conditional (lever you're NOT pulling), (5) a one-sentence ask.

Scene: Your real chart (recommended)

A: You walk it.

B: Imagined listener: your CEO, who has 90 seconds.

Scene: Sales pipeline chart

A: Walk a hypothetical Q3 pipeline that dipped in June and rebounded in August.

B: Imagined listener: the CRO, who cares about the number by Sept 30.

Scene: Customer NPS chart

A: Walk a hypothetical NPS that plateaued at 32 for six months.

B: Imagined listener: the Head of Product, who wants to know which lever moves it.

Extra speaking task — 30-second Slack-DM version

Now compress the SAME chart-walkthrough into a 30-second voice note — the version you'd send your boss in Slack on a Sunday. Three sentences only: shape, story, ask. Record and compare. Which one would you actually send?

Writing mini-task

Write the 3-sentence version of your chart-walkthrough (max 55 words). Sentence 1: shape + baseline → current. Sentence 2: first-conditional (base case, no action). Sentence 3: first-conditional ask (the lever you WOULD pull + expected outcome).

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Wrap-up

One trend verb (surge, plateau, rebound…) you'll use in your next chart-walkthrough instead of 'went up'.

One first-conditional line you'll actually say in your next update.

One 'stretch vs commit' distinction you'll make explicit next time.

Quiz

1. A good chart-walkthrough starts with…
   (A) The methodology
   (B) A plain-English sentence — punchline before picture
   (C) An apology
2. 'If we cut ad spend by 20%, sign-ups drop 15%.' — which conditional?
   (A) Zero
   (B) First
   (C) Second
3. 'If we doubled the ad budget tomorrow, we'd grow 15%.' — which conditional?
   (A) First
   (B) Second
   (C) Third
4. The trap 'If we will grow, we hire' is wrong because…
   (A) 'will' cannot follow IF in a first conditional
   (B) 'hire' should be past
   (C) It should be 'were'
5. The manager who wins the CEO slot…
   (A) Uses the most acronyms
   (B) Names shape, story and ask
   (C) Promises the lowest number

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Workbook — home practice

Exercise 1 — Trend collocations

Complete each sentence with ONE phrase from the box.

Word bank: spiked · plateaued · rebounded · slumped · doubled · outlier

1. Sign-ups ___ in the first week of the campaign — from 200 a day to almost 900.

2. Web traffic ___ at around 40k sessions/week for the whole quarter.

3. Revenue ___ in Q1 after the outage, then ___ once the fixes shipped.

4. Our headcount has ___ from 20 to 40 in twelve months.

5. Ignore the Black Friday week — it's an ___.

1b. Vocabulary — discursive writing

Write a 150-word report analyzing a recent trend in your industry or company performance. Use the unit's trend vocabulary to describe the 'shape' of the data on a chart, and use conditionals (zero, first, or second) to discuss future implications.

id: vocab-discursive

type: writing

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Use all 6 target vocabulary items.

Use at least two different types of conditional sentences.

Describe chart shapes clearly (e.g., 'spiked then plateaued').

Conclude with a clear strategic recommendation.

model: Market Performance Analysis: Q2-Q3 Our user engagement metrics have shown significant volatility over the last six months. In April, daily active users spiked following the launch of our mobile app, but engagement plateaued throughout May as we reached the limit of our initial marketing reach. Unfortunately, during the June server outage, our traffic slumped by 30%. However, I am pleased to see that numbers have rebounded strongly in July, nearly reaching our April highs. Our sign-up rate has doubled compared to this time last year, though the final week of August remains an outlier due to a viral social media mention. If we maintain this momentum, we will beat our annual target by 15%. However, if we were to ignore the current retention data, we would risk a high churn rate in Q4. My recommendation is to focus on stabilizing the user experience. If we invest in infrastructure now, we will ensure long-term stability and growth.

Exercise 2 — Zero, first or second?

Choose the best conditional and complete the sentence.

1. General rule: if we ___ (cut) ad spend 20%, sign-ups ___ (drop) about 15%.
2. Realistic plan: if the November renewal ___ (close), we ___ (beat) plan.
3. Hypothetical: if the market ___ (crash) tomorrow, we ___ (freeze) hiring.
4. Realistic: if we ___ (hold) the current spend, we ___ (flat-line) at €5.4m.
5. Hypothetical: if churn ___ (halve), we ___ (hit) €7m without touching sales.

Exercise 3 — Fix the grammar

Each sentence has ONE conditional error. Rewrite it.

1. If we will grow 20%, we hire two more engineers.
2. If we cut prices, sign-ups going up.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

3. If we would double the ad budget, we would grow 15%.

4. If the November deal closes, we would beat plan.

Exercise 4 — Chart shape ↔ verb

Match each chart shape to its most natural verb.

Line rises very steeply for one month, then holds. — spiked, then plateaued

Line drops sharply, then climbs back to previous level. — fell, then rebounded

Line stays at roughly the same level for six months. — flat-lined

Line rises slowly and consistently every month. — climbed steadily

Line falls fast and stays down. — slumped

Line grows from 20 to 40. — doubled

Exercise 5 — Three chart-walkthroughs

You'll hear three managers walk the same chart (monthly churn: 3.0% → 4.5% over six months).

1. Which manager wins the CEO slot?

2. Which manager buries the story in adjectives?

3. Which manager overcommits without evidence?

Voice A (Priya): So what you're seeing is a concerning trajectory. Meaningful degradation over the trailing six-month window represents non-trivial exposure, particularly in mid-market.

Voice B (Rafael): The story is this — monthly churn climbed steadily from 3.0 to 4.5% over six months. It started when we deprecated the old onboarding in March. If we fund the onboarding rebuild — one engineer, six weeks — we'll bring it back under 3% by year-end. If we halved prices tomorrow, we'd stop the bleeding, but we'd gut the margin. So the ask is the engineer, not the price cut.

Voice C (Danny): Yeah, churn's up but I'm confident. Better onboarding, better pricing, we're brainstorming. Give us the quarter and we'll definitely bring it back under 2%.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise 6 — Write a 3-sentence chart-walkthrough

Pick a real chart from your work. In 3 sentences (max 55 words): (1) shape + baseline → current, (2) first-conditional base case (no action), (3) first-conditional ask (the lever you'd pull + expected outcome).

Exercise 7 — Case study reflection: The board deck

Think about the Meridian Analytics case. Answer the questions.

1. What is the ONE change you'd force the CEO to make in her opening 15 seconds?

2. Design the ONE slide the CEO will keep coming back to when the board asks 'what happens if it's wrong?'

3. What ONE-sentence coaching rule would you pin to the top of every finance slide from now on?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Answer key — Class Book

Lead-in: name the shape

1. grew steadily
2. spiked, then plateaued
3. fell sharply, then rebounded
4. there's a clear outlier

Reading: The chart-walkthrough that lands

1. (B) Support a specific plain-English sentence
2. (B) The decision you want the room to make
3. (B) First
4. (B) It's a fuzzy translation — the shape doesn't appear in the listener's head

Vocabulary: verbs of change, shapes and hedges

1. spiked
2. climbed
3. slumped; rebounded
4. plateaued / flat-lined
5. outlier
6. doubled

1. Sign-ups surged in the first week of the campaign.
2. Cancellations climbed steadily every month between April and August.
3. Revenue slumped after the outage, then rebounded once the fixes shipped.
4. Web traffic plateaued around 40k sessions/week for the whole quarter.
5. Ignore the Black Friday week — it's an outlier.

Grammar focus: Conditionals for forecasting

1. Zero — 'If we cut ad spend by 20%, sign-ups drop about 15%.'
2. First — 'If the pipeline holds, we'll beat plan.'
3. Second — 'If the market crashed tomorrow, we'd freeze hiring and extend runway to 18 months.'
4. Second — 'If we doubled the ad budget tomorrow, we'd probably grow another 15% — but I wouldn't recommend it.'

1. 'If we grow 20%, we'll hire two more engineers.' (No 'will' in the if-clause.)
2. 'If we cut prices, sign-ups go up.' (Zero conditional: both present.)
3. 'If we doubled the ad budget, we'd grow 15%.' (No 'would' in the if-clause.)
4. 'If the November deal closes, we'll beat plan.' (Realistic → first conditional.)

1. Model: 'If we do nothing, we'll flat-line at €4.2m through year-end. If we re-priced the top 20 accounts, we'd add roughly €400k of ARR — but we'd probably lose two of them in the process.'
2. Model: 'If we keep the current onboarding, churn will keep climbing — probably to 5.5% by Q4. If we rebuilt onboarding in the next six weeks, we'd bring it back under 3% by year-end — but it costs one engineer full-time.'
3. Model: 'If we hold the current podcast cadence, we'll keep this 40% lift through Q4. If we tripled podcast spend tomorrow, we'd probably see diminishing returns — the last cohort already came in at CAC 1.4× the target.'

Listening: three chart-walkthroughs

1. Voice B (Rafael). Names the shape ('climbed steadily'), gives the story (post-onboarding rebuild), and closes with a clear first-conditional ask ('if we fund the onboarding rebuild, we'll bring it back under 3%').
2. Voice A (Priya) — 'concerning trajectory, meaningful degradation, non-trivial exposure' with no shape word and no ask.
3. Voice C (Danny) — 'we'll definitely bring it back under 2%' — no evidence, no lever named, no risk case.

1. Monthly churn: 3.0% → 4.5% over six months — about 50% up.
2. First conditional — 'If we fund the onboarding rebuild, we'll bring it back under 3% by year-end.'
3. 'If we halved prices tomorrow, we'd stop the bleeding — but we'd also gut the margin.'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. It gives the room the punchline first — the chart then confirms it, instead of being decoded. Listener trust goes up because they don't feel tested.
2. The listener has to reconstruct it themselves. Half the room reconstructs it wrong, and the manager has lost them without noticing.
3. It's overcommitting without evidence. A single unbacked promise poisons the next three real ones. Better: 'if we fund X, we'll bring it back under 3% — under 2% is the stretch, not the commit.'

Quiz

1. (B) A plain-English sentence — punchline before picture
2. (A) Zero
3. (B) Second
4. (A) 'will' cannot follow IF in a first conditional
5. (B) Names shape, story and ask

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Answer key — Workbook

Exercise 1 — Trend collocations

1. spiked
2. plateaued
3. slumped; rebounded
4. doubled
5. outlier

Exercise 2 — Zero, first or second?

1. cut; drop (zero conditional)
2. closes; will beat (first)
3. crashed; would freeze (second)
4. hold; will flat-line (first)
5. halved; would hit (second)

Exercise 3 — Fix the grammar

1. 'If we grow 20%, we'll hire two more engineers.' (No 'will' in the if-clause.)
2. 'If we cut prices, sign-ups go up.' (Zero conditional: both present.)
3. 'If we doubled the ad budget, we'd grow 15%.'
4. 'If the November deal closes, we'll beat plan.' (Realistic → first conditional.)

Exercise 5 — Three chart-walkthroughs

1. Voice B (Rafael) — names the shape, gives the story, uses a first-conditional ask.
2. Voice A (Priya) — 'concerning trajectory / meaningful degradation' — no shape, no ask.
3. Voice C (Danny) — 'we'll definitely bring it back under 2%' — no lever named.

Exercise 7 — Case study reflection: The board deck

1. Model: keep the +35% headline, add ONE second-conditional right after it — 'if both November renewals walked, we'd land at 5.0 — still 20% up'. The number stays; the credibility triples.
2. Model: three columns — Commit (5.0), Plan (5.4), Stretch (5.6). Under each: ONE assumption that has to hold, ONE lever that moves it.
3. Model: 'If a board member can't circle the ONE number and the ONE risk in five seconds, the slide is not done.'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class