



APEX ENGLISH · A2 BUSINESS

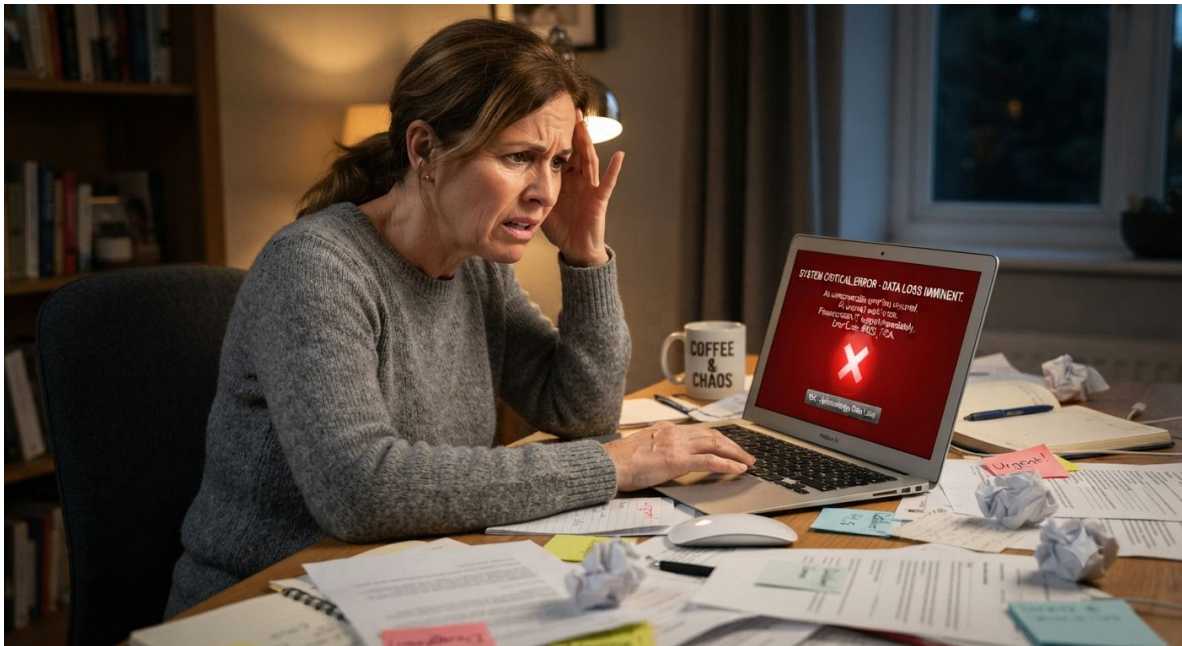
Unit A2-8A

Something went wrong

Problems at work — owning what went wrong

Something went wrong

Problems at work — owning what went wrong · A2+ · 55–65 min · Business English



“A problem is a bad hour. A hidden problem is a bad quarter.”

— Rule of the honest team

Objectives

- Use past simple contrasted with past continuous to narrate an incident with a clear timeline.
- Write a concise, professional incident update email that acknowledges, informs, and commits.
- Speak for 60–90 seconds explaining what went wrong, what you did, and what changes.
- Distinguish between apologising for the impact and admitting legal liability.

Class Book

Warm-up · Quick starter

Solo · about you · 4 min

Think through these three questions before we start. No writing needed.

- Recall the last incident at work that had a real business impact. What broke, and for how long?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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- When something goes wrong, who do you tell first — and why in that order?
 - What's the difference for you between 'I'm sorry this happened' and 'It was our fault'?
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Lead-in • The Monday-morning inbox

Mailbox • triage & draft • 8 min

You arrive at 08:45 and open three unread messages. Read each one and note (a) how urgent it is (High / Medium / Low), (b) who you would loop in, and (c) a first-line reply.

Follow-up: Notice the pattern in all three: acknowledge, inform, commit — in that order.

Reading • The delivery that never arrived

10 min

Last Tuesday, one of our biggest clients called at 14:07. Their production line had been idle since eight in the morning — because a pallet of parts we had promised them for Friday still hadn't arrived. On our system, the delivery was marked as 'completed'. On their loading bay, it wasn't.

We pulled the timeline. The truck left Lisbon at 06:00, exactly as planned. Around 09:30, the driver stopped in Coimbra because a warning light came on. He fixed the issue in about forty minutes — but he didn't call anybody, because he thought he was still 'on time'. Between his arrival window and our automated tracker, three hours quietly disappeared.

At 14:15 we phoned the client back. We didn't invent excuses; we told them exactly what we knew, exactly what we didn't know yet, and gave them a specific commitment: a replacement pallet on the road within ninety minutes and a written incident note by 18:00. They weren't happy — but they weren't shouting either. They understood that we were being straight with them.

The next day we sent a small goodwill gesture: a case of local wine and a handwritten card from the operations manager. The client emailed back the same afternoon: 'Thank you for being honest — most of your competitors would have blamed the driver and disappeared.' Two weeks later they renewed the annual contract early.

The lesson? A late delivery is a bad hour. A late delivery you try to hide is a lost customer. Since that Tuesday, every driver is required to call in every two hours, regardless of whether things are on track. It costs us nothing. It probably saved us a quarter of a million euros a year.

Comprehension check

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. What was 'quietly' wrong for three hours?

- ☐ **A.** The client's factory had stopped working
- ☐ **B.** The driver's location vs. the tracker vs. our promise no longer matched
- ☐ **C.** The truck had broken down and could not be repaired

2. Why was the client 'not happy but not shouting'?

- ☐ **A.** Because they were used to late deliveries
- ☐ **B.** Because the company was straight with them and made a concrete commitment
- ☐ **C.** Because they had received a discount already

3. The main argument of the last paragraph is that...

- ☐ **A.** Drivers are unreliable and should be replaced
- ☐ **B.** A hidden problem is more expensive than the problem itself
- ☐ **C.** Goodwill gestures always solve customer complaints

True, False or Not Given?

Choose based on the text only.

1. The company blamed the driver publicly.

- ☐ **A.** True
- ☐ **B.** False
- ☐ **C.** Not Given

2. The replacement pallet arrived within ninety minutes of the phone call.

- ☐ **A.** True
- ☐ **B.** False
- ☐ **C.** Not Given

3. Since the incident, drivers must check in every two hours even when everything is fine.

- ☐ **A.** True
- ☐ **B.** False
- ☐ **C.** Not Given

About the text — think and write

Answer briefly, then write the discursive task in full paragraph form.

1. The text says the driver 'thought he was still on time'. Why is this a systems problem, not a driver problem?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. In your own workplace, where would a 'quiet three hours' most likely appear? What would the equivalent of the two-hour check-in look like?

3. ****Discursive task (100–130 words).**** In your own words, explain why, according to the text, 'a hidden problem is more expensive than the problem itself'. Give one example from your own professional experience, describe how it was (or wasn't) surfaced, and finish with one process rule you would recommend to prevent a repeat.

Vocabulary · Incident communication

10 min

Roles

Term	Meaning
downtime	period when a service, machine or person is not working
root cause	the underlying reason, not just the symptom
workaround	a temporary fix that keeps things running while you fix the real thing
goodwill gesture	a small compensation offered to preserve the relationship, not because you have to
post-mortem	an honest, blame-free review of what went wrong and why
escalate	to hand a problem up to someone with more authority

Smalltalk

Term	Meaning
own it	take responsibility publicly and act
loop in	add the right people to the conversation early
circle back	come back to a topic once you have more information
hold the line	keep things stable while a fix is being deployed
put out fires	spend the day reacting to urgent problems
no blame, just fix	principle: solve first, review the process, don't shame the person

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Practice

Complete each sentence with **ONE** word or phrase from the lists above.

1. We had 47 minutes of ___ this morning, but customer impact was minimal because Support had a script ready.
2. Let's not just patch the symptom — I want us to find the ___ before we close the ticket.
3. Manual invoicing is a ___ for now; we'll rebuild the integration next sprint.
4. I'd like to ___ your account manager on this so they hear the update from us first.
5. We're not going to blame anyone in this meeting — this is a ___, not a court case.
6. This is above my authority. I'm going to ___ to my director.

Collocations · verb + noun

Match each verb with the correct noun / phrase.

Term	Meaning
own	the mistake
issue	a status update
contain	the impact
restore	service
log	a formal complaint
waive	a fee (as a goodwill gesture)

Odd one out — which register is different?

One option is far too casual for a written client update.

1. Which of these belongs in an email to a key account?
 - ☐ **A.** We are actively investigating the issue.
 - ☐ **B.** We're on it — will revert shortly.
 - ☐ **C.** The situation is under control and being handled by our team.
 - ☐ **D.** Yeah so basically everything's gone a bit mental over here.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. Which is NOT a real apology?

- ☐ A. I'm sorry this happened.
- ☐ B. I take responsibility for this.
- ☐ C. Mistakes were made.
- ☐ D. That was on us — here's what we're doing.

Grammar · past simple vs. past continuous (setting the scene)

14 min

1. Past simple — the events, in order

Use for a completed action at a defined moment in the past.

- The system crashed at 09:12.
- We called the client at 14:15.
- She sent the corrected file straight away.

2. Past continuous — the background / what was already happening

Use for an action in progress around a past moment; often paired with past simple.

- At 09:00, the team was running the morning stand-up when the alert came in.
- The driver was fixing a warning light while our tracker was still saying 'on time'.
- Form: was/were + verb-ing.

3. Signal words

while / as → past continuous (background).

when / at 09:12 / suddenly → past simple (event that interrupts).

- While the driver was stopping in Coimbra, three hours quietly disappeared.

4. Negatives & questions

- She wasn't calling the client — she was checking the tracker.
- What were you doing when the alert came in?
- Did anyone escalate it before 10am?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise A — Choose past simple or past continuous

Complete with the correct form.

1. At 09:30, the driver ___ (fix) the warning light when he ___ (get) the missed-call notification.
 2. While we ___ (write) the incident note, the client ___ (renew) the contract early.
 3. I ___ (not / hide) the problem — I ___ (still / gather) the facts.
 4. What ___ Marta ___ (do) when the pallet ___ (fail) to arrive?
 5. The gateway ___ (recover) at 06:55, but 40 orders ___ (already / bounce).
-

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise B — Rewrite so both tenses appear

Combine each pair into ONE sentence using past continuous + past simple.

1. The team was running the stand-up. + The alert came in.

2. I was drafting the reply. + My manager called me.

3. We were checking the tracker. + The client phoned.

4. Ana was uploading the correct file. + I was writing to the client.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise C — Discursive: narrate an incident (80-100 words)

Write a short internal note about a real or realistic incident, using AT LEAST 3 past continuous + 3 past simple verbs. Include one 'while' and one 'when' clause. Underline (in your head) which is background and which is event.

1. Your note starts with: 'At [time] on [day], while we were _____, _____.'

Describe the picture



Look at the picture. In 5-6 sentences, narrate what is happening AND reconstruct what was probably happening 30 minutes earlier. Use past simple for the events on screen and past continuous for what led up to them.

Target language: At [time], she was ... · When the alert came in, she was already ... · Meanwhile, her colleague was ... · She didn't panic — she ... · By [time], the situation was ...

Listening · Operations manager gives a 90-second incident briefing

10 min

An operations manager gives a short, structured briefing to the leadership team at the start of the day. One voice (male).

Before you listen

- In a professional briefing, in what order do you expect: facts, impact, cause, next steps, ask?
- Which of those does an inexperienced speaker usually skip — and why?

Gist

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. Who is the audience of this briefing?

2. What is the speaker's overall stance?

Detail

1. What was happening on our side when the incident was first noticed?

2. What specific commitment does the speaker make to the client?

3. What process change is being introduced from today?

Listen and complete

Complete with the exact words the speaker uses.

1. 'At 09:12, while the team __ __ __ __, the alert came in.'

2. 'I've committed to Marta that we'll be back with a written note by __.'

3. 'From today, every driver __ __ __ two hours — full stop.'

Useful incident-briefing phrases

Match each phrase to its function.

Term	Meaning
Here's what we know so far...	state the facts you have
The impact on the customer is...	quantify the damage
The root cause appears to be...	give a hypothesis, not a final verdict
Our next three actions are...	commit to concrete next steps
What I need from you is...	ask for a decision or support

Speaking · Own the incident

10 min

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Use the language of this unit — past simple / past continuous, incident vocabulary, structured briefing phrases — to run these three tasks with a partner.

Writing · Incident update email (120-150 words)

12 min (or homework)

Write a professional incident update email to a key client (Marta at Nordwerk). Include: (a) a one-line acknowledgement of impact, (b) the facts you have and the facts you don't, (c) a specific commitment with a time, (d) one goodwill gesture, (e) a proactive next step (the two-hour check-in). Use at least THREE past simple / past continuous verbs. Avoid the phrase 'mistakes were made'.

Workbook

Something went wrong — Workbook

1. Vocabulary in context

Complete each sentence with ONE word or phrase from the box. Two items are extra.

1. The payment gateway had 47 minutes of ___ this morning, but only 12 checkouts actually failed.
2. Manual invoicing is a ___ for now — the real integration will be rebuilt next sprint.
3. Let's not just patch the symptom. I want the ___ before we close this ticket.
4. We're going to ___ the account manager on this so the client hears the update from us first.
5. By way of a ___, we'll waive the delivery fee on your next three orders.
6. I don't have the authority to approve this refund — I'll ___ to my director.
7. Only Ricardo knows the deploy password. That's a textbook ___ _ _ _.
8. Tomorrow morning we'll run a 30-minute blame-free ___ on this incident.

2. Past simple vs. past continuous

Write the correct form(s) of the verb(s) in brackets.

1. At 09:12, while the team ___ (run) the morning stand-up, the alert ___ (come) in.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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2. The driver ___ (fix) a warning light in Coimbra when our tracker still ___ (say) 'on time'.
-
3. I ___ (draft) the reply to Marta when my manager ___ (call) me from the airport.
-
4. We ___ (not hide) the problem — we ___ (still gather) the facts.
-
5. What ___ (you / do) at 06:55 when the gateway ___ (recover)?
-
6. The Ops team ___ (write) the incident note while Sales ___ (already speak) to the client.
-
7. Between 09:30 and 12:30, three hours ___ (quietly / disappear) — and nobody ___ (notice).
-

3. Communication register

Choose the option that would be appropriate in a professional client update.

1. First line of an incident email to a key account:

- ☐ A. Hi — small hiccup our end, sorry!
- ☐ B. I'm writing to let you know we've identified an issue affecting your service and to share what we're doing about it.
- ☐ C. Yeah so basically everything's a mess but we're on it.

2. Which is a real apology?

- ☐ A. Mistakes were made.
- ☐ B. We'd like to apologise for the impact this had on your team, and I take responsibility for how it was handled.
- ☐ C. Sorry if you feel that way.

3. Which sentence commits you the LEAST — and is therefore the least reassuring?

- ☐ A. We'll circle back within the hour with a specific timeline.
- ☐ B. We'll do our best to look into it as soon as possible.
- ☐ C. By 18:00 today you'll have a written incident note in your inbox.

4. Which belongs in a blame-free internal review?

- ☐ A. Ana approved it too quickly.
- ☐ B. The process didn't require a second signature — that's the fix.
- ☐ C. Let's just make sure it doesn't happen again.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

5. 'The root cause appears to be...' is stronger than 'The root cause is...' because:

- ☐ A. It sounds more polite.
- ☐ B. It signals a hypothesis to be verified, not a final verdict — which is honest.
- ☐ C. It is more formal.

4. Find and fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE grammar or register mistake typical of A2+/B1 professionals. Rewrite it correctly.

1. While the alert was come in, the team run their stand-up.

2. I was writing the reply when suddenly my manager was calling me.

3. Sorry if you feel we let you down.

4. The driver didn't called because he thought he was on time.

5. Mistakes were made yesterday and we all learned a lot.

6. The system was crash at 10am while I have my coffee.

5. Reading & discursive response

Read the short case, then answer.

1. Case: Late on Friday, a member of your ops team notices that a batch of 200 outgoing invoices contains a €50 rounding error each. The client hasn't complained yet. The team lead says: 'It's Friday evening — let's just fix it Monday morning and quietly reissue.' In 100–130 words, argue for OR against that approach, using this unit's language (past simple / past continuous, incident vocabulary, 'own it', 'root cause', etc.).

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

6. Listening — incident-response voicemail

A team lead leaves a 60-second voicemail for a colleague who is off sick. Listen (or read the transcript) and answer.

1. What is the caller's overall tone — and why is that a good choice?

2. What specifically had ALREADY been done before the caller left the message?

3. What does the caller explicitly tell the colleague NOT to do?

4. Name the ONE corrective action mentioned.

7. Writing — Incident update email (120–150 words)

You are the account manager. Write a 120–150 word email to a key client (Marta at Nordwerk) about yesterday's missing pallet. Include: (1) a one-line acknowledgement of impact, (2) the facts you have + the facts you don't, (3) a specific commitment with a time, (4) a goodwill gesture, (5) a proactive process change. Use AT LEAST three past-simple and two past-continuous verbs. Do NOT use 'mistakes were made', 'we'll do our best', or 'sorry if'.

8. Case study preview

Look at this unit's Case Study. Answer briefly.

1. What is the main challenge in the case for Unit 8, and which stakeholder is under the most pressure?

2. If you were chairing the post-mortem for this case, what would be your ONE corrective action — and who would own it by when?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
