



UNIT 3A · BUSINESS C1

Looking back on the pivot

Class Book and Workbook · one complete unit

OBJECTIVES

What you'll be able to do

4 min

- Distinguish a wrong outcome from a wrong decision — and defend the distinction out loud.
- Deploy modal perfects (should/might/could/would/ought to have) with C1 register precision.
- Run a blameless retrospective on a decision of your own.
- Recognise hindsight bias in your own retrospective language and name it.

LEAD-IN

The room after the outage

8 min

FRAME · A POST-MORTEM, 22:40

Look at the timeline pinned to the wall. The team knows the outcome; six weeks ago, they did not. On your own, consider:

- Which two sentences in the room right now are contaminated by hindsight bias — and which speaker would say them?
- Rewrite one of those sentences into a legitimate modal perfect (e.g. "We should have escalated earlier") that a blameless post-mortem could actually keep.
- What is the difference between "she should have known" and "the team ought to have read its own dashboard"? Which one belongs in the document?
- Draft the one sentence you would put at the top of the summary.

Bring your four written answers to the next class. Your teacher will collect two columns on the board: decision judgments vs outcome judgments.

READING

The pivot that wasn't obvious at the time

15 min

There is a genre of business writing, popular at airport bookshops, that describes pivots as if the founders had always known. In the interview, the CEO leans back and says the market spoke, we listened, we moved — as if the pivot had been a single, luminous meeting rather than the eleven-month, resentment-fuelled argument it actually was. What is missing from the airport version is the texture of the decision at the time it was made: the data that pointed both ways, the customer who begged them not to move, the two board members who resigned three weeks after the vote.

The reason this matters is not academic. Founders who read the airport version internalise a lesson their own pivot will punish them for. They imagine that clarity is available in the moment; they suspect themselves of cowardice when it isn't; and they will, in due course, sit in their own retrospective and — with the benefit of hindsight — punish themselves and their team for a fog that was, at the time, meteorologically real.

A properly conducted retrospective, then, has two duties that pull against each other. It must be honest about the decisions that were, in hindsight, wrong — and it must also be honest about which of those decisions were reasonable at the time, given what was legible in the data. The distinction is not academic hair-splitting. A team that treats every wrong outcome as a wrong decision will, within eighteen months, be a team that no longer makes decisions.

The most useful sentence any leader learns to say is: "That was a reasonable call, on the information we had, and the outcome was still bad." It is a sentence that keeps the team's judgment intact while refusing to defend the outcome. It is also, tellingly, the sentence hindsight bias most reliably prevents.

Choose the best answer.

- The writer's chief complaint about airport-bookshop pivots is that they:
 - (a) are inaccurate on the numbers
 - (b) airbrush out the fog and disagreement present at the time of the decision
 - (c) focus on failures rather than successes
 - (d) over-praise the CEO

Answer key: (b) airbrush out the fog and disagreement present at the time of the decision

- The 'lesson their own pivot will punish them for' is:
 - (a) that pivots are always right
 - (b) that clarity was available in the moment
 - (c) that founders should never listen to customers
 - (d) that boards are irrelevant

Answer key: (b) that clarity was available in the moment

- The two duties of a proper retrospective, per the writer, are to:
 - (a) blame quickly and forgive quickly
 - (b) distinguish wrong outcomes from wrong decisions
 - (c) assign KPIs and cut costs
 - (d) hire externally and fire internally

Answer key: (b) distinguish wrong outcomes from wrong decisions

- The 'most useful sentence' the writer identifies preserves:
 - (a) the CEO's authority
 - (b) team morale
 - (c) the team's judgment while refusing to defend the outcome
 - (d) the board's confidence

Answer key: (c) the team's judgment while refusing to defend the outcome

- Hindsight bias, in this piece, is presented primarily as:
 - (a) a cognitive curiosity
 - (b) a systemic threat to future decision-making capacity
 - (c) an HR problem
 - (d) a legal risk

Answer key: (b) a systemic threat to future decision-making capacity

Teacher notes

Follow-up: Identify one sentence in the text you would keep as a laminated card on your desk for the next retrospective. Write the specific decision it would help you interrogate.

AUTHENTIC READING · REAL TEXT

Amy Edmondson on psychological safety and the honest post-mortem

Source: Adapted from Amy Edmondson, 'The Fearless Organization' (Wiley, 2018) and related HBR interviews · Excerpted for classroom use under fair-dealing for educational commentary.

C1+

≈ 380 words

Harvard's Amy Edmondson has spent two decades showing that the highest-performing teams are not the ones that make the fewest errors — they are the ones that surface the most. Read this adapted synthesis and answer the questions.

Amy Edmondson's early research produced a finding her funders found difficult to accept: the best-performing nursing teams in the hospitals she studied reported significantly more medication errors than the worst-performing teams. The tempting conclusion — that the best teams were sloppier — turned out to be exactly wrong. The best teams were not making more errors; they were reporting them. In the low-performing units, an error was a career hazard; in the high-performing units, it was a data point.

Edmondson's term for the underlying condition — psychological safety — has since been misread, in some quarters, as a licence for softness. It is not. Psychological safety is the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking: the risk of admitting an error, questioning a superior, raising a concern that might be wrong. Its opposite is not fear of failure; it is fear of being seen to fail.

The consequence for leaders conducting a post-mortem is uncomfortable. If the team has been trained, over years, to protect itself from the leader's disappointment, no amount of blameless framing on the day of the meeting will produce honest testimony. The leader will hear a rehearsed narrative; the actual near-misses, the actual moments of doubt, will remain private.

The rebuilding, Edmondson argues, has to be done in visible small acts long before the crisis. A leader who reacts badly to a mid-week 'I'm not sure this is working' is a leader who has taught the team, credibly, not to raise the same concern on the day of the incident. The concessive language — 'that was a fair challenge', 'you were right to flag that', 'I hadn't seen it that way' — is not diplomatic decoration. It is the leader's own data-collection system.

There is a specifically C1 register that codes for psychological safety without collapsing into flattery: the tentative diagnostic verb ('I wonder if...', 'it may be that...'), the hedged retrospective ('with the benefit of hindsight, we might have...'), and the modal perfect used against oneself ('I ought to have asked earlier'). Leaders who make these structures visible give their teams permission to use them back.

Edmondson is clear that psychological safety is not the goal — it is the enabling condition. The goal is candour under pressure, and the honest post-mortem is where a leader finds out whether the condition holds.

1. READ FOR GIST

- 1. What was the counter-intuitive finding in Edmondson's early hospital research?
Answer key: The best-performing teams reported more errors, not fewer — because they surfaced them rather than hid them.
- 2. What does psychological safety actually mean, in Edmondson's definition?
Answer key: The shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

2. READ FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why does she reject the reading of psychological safety as 'softness'?
Answer key: Because its opposite is fear of being seen to fail — safety enables the harder conversation, not the easier one.
- 2. What is the leader's 'own data-collection system', per the writer?
Answer key: The concessive language that signals it is safe to disagree.

- 3. Which C1 structures code for safety without collapsing into flattery?

Answer key: Tentative diagnostic verbs, hedged retrospectives, and modal perfects used against oneself.

- 4. What does Edmondson name as the actual goal — psychological safety being only the enabling condition?

Answer key: Candour under pressure.

3. GLOSSARY

psychological safety

the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking

interpersonal risk

the social risk of admitting an error, dissenting, or asking a question

candour under pressure

the willingness to be honest at the moment honesty is most costly

concessive language

phrases that acknowledge the other's point before answering it

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- When did you last hear a leader use a modal perfect against themselves?
- What is the mid-week concern in your team that no-one is raising?
- Where does 'candour under pressure' cost most in your organisation?

5. WRITING TASK · DISCURSIVE

Write a 200–240-word 'micro-post-mortem' of a decision you were part of in the last twelve months whose outcome was worse than expected.

- Distinguish the wrong outcome from the wrong decision.
- Use at least three modal perfects (should have, might have, could have, ought to have).
- End with the sentence: 'It was a reasonable call, on the information we had, and the outcome was still bad' — or refuse it, and say why.

Write at least 200 words.

VOCABULARY

Retrospection & the honest review

12 min

Match each term to its definition.

- pivot
a decisive change in direction while keeping the underlying vision intact
- post-mortem
a structured review of a decision after the outcome is known
- blameless review
a post-mortem that separates the decision from the people who made it
- hindsight bias
the tendency to see past events as more predictable than they were

- sunk cost
money or effort already spent that should not influence a forward-looking choice
- second-order effect
a consequence caused by the first consequence, often unforeseen
- counterfactual
a plausible alternative version of what could have happened instead
- course correction
a smaller, in-flight adjustment short of a full pivot

Complete each sentence with a word from the box.

- The board demanded a full post-mortem_ within a fortnight of the outage — no blame, just findings.
- We should have made a course correction_ in month three, not a full pivot in month nine.
- Every retrospective is contaminated, to some degree, by hindsight bias_.
- The eleven million we had already spent was a sunk cost_ ; it should not have shaped the go/no-go call.
- The most useful counterfactual_ in the room was: what if we had shipped the smaller version in Q2?
- The pivot_ away from consumer and into enterprise, in hindsight, was the decision that saved the company.

Choose the best answer.

- A 'blameless post-mortem' is defined by:
 - (a) removing all names from the document
 - (b) separating the quality of the decision from the identity of the decider
 - (c) avoiding hard conclusions
 - (d) shortening the meeting*Answer key: (b) separating the quality of the decision from the identity of the decider*
- 'Hindsight bias' most damages a retrospective when:
 - (a) it makes the team too cautious
 - (b) it makes obvious in retrospect what was genuinely unknowable at the time
 - (c) it makes the team blame the CEO
 - (d) it slows the meeting*Answer key: (b) it makes obvious in retrospect what was genuinely unknowable at the time*
- The correct treatment of a 'sunk cost' in a forward-looking decision is to:
 - (a) recover it before deciding
 - (b) amortise it over five years
 - (c) ignore it — it is spent either way
 - (d) double down to protect it*Answer key: (c) ignore it — it is spent either way*
- A 'second-order effect' of a hiring freeze is likely to be:
 - (a) lower payroll next quarter
 - (b) attrition of top performers who read the freeze as a signal
 - (c) a stronger balance sheet
 - (d) faster onboarding*Answer key: (b) attrition of top performers who read the freeze as a signal*

LISTENING

Interrogate the decision, not the deciders

12 min

Rafa (CEO), Priya (CPO) and Sam (CFO) run a blameless post-mortem on a deferred product decision. Read the transcript (audio coming soon) and answer.

CEO (RAFA): OK — blameless post-mortem. Rule one: we are here to interrogate the decision, not the deciders. Priya, walk us through the Q2 call.

CPO (PRIYA): In April we chose to defer the enterprise SKU by a quarter to protect the consumer roadmap. In hindsight, we should have made the opposite call.

CFO (SAM): Priya — hold on. 'Should have' is retrospective. On the information you had, was it defensible?

PRIYA: On the information we had, yes. Consumer NPS was still climbing, enterprise had two signed logos and a soft pipeline. It was a reasonable call. The outcome was bad.

RAFA: Good. Say it once more, for the room.

PRIYA: It was a reasonable call, on the information we had, and the outcome was still bad.

SAM: What would you need to have seen in April to have made the other call?

PRIYA: Two things. Enterprise pipeline conversion — we had a leading indicator we weren't reading. And the churn signal in the consumer cohort from March, which we had, and dismissed.

RAFA: So — 'we ought to have read our own dashboard'.

PRIYA: We ought to have read our own dashboard. That's the sentence.

RAFA: Right. That goes in the doc. Not 'Priya made a bad call'. 'The team ought to have read its own dashboard.' Sam, can we operationalise that for Q3?

SAM: Yes. A weekly leading-indicator review, chaired by the CPO, on the record.

Choose the best answer.

- Rafa's opening rule — 'interrogate the decision, not the deciders' — is a definition of:
 - (a) a blameless post-mortem
 - (b) a firing meeting
 - (c) a strategy review
 - (d) an audit

Answer key: (a) a blameless post-mortem

- Sam interrupts Priya's 'should have' because he wants to:
 - (a) defend her
 - (b) distinguish a wrong decision from a wrong outcome
 - (c) avoid the topic
 - (d) protect the board

Answer key: (b) distinguish a wrong decision from a wrong outcome

- The sentence Rafa asks Priya to repeat is important because it:
 - (a) blames nobody at all
 - (b) preserves team judgment while refusing to defend the outcome
 - (c) shortens the meeting
 - (d) sounds humble

Answer key: (b) preserves team judgment while refusing to defend the outcome

- The concrete Q3 change is:
 - (a) firing the CPO
 - (b) a weekly leading-indicator review chaired by the CPO, on the record
 - (c) a hiring freeze
 - (d) a board-level pivot

Answer key: (b) a weekly leading-indicator review chaired by the CPO, on the record

Teacher notes

Extension: Ask the student to re-record Priya's key sentence with three different intonations: defensive, defeated, and clinical. Which one belongs in a real post-mortem — and why?

AUTHENTIC LISTENING · REAL VOICES

Blameless post-mortems — John Allspaw on separating decision from outcome

Source: Adapted from John Allspaw, 'Blameless PostMortems and a Just Culture' (Etsy engineering blog / conference talks) · Excerpted for classroom use under fair-dealing for educational commentary.

C1+

□ ≈ 3 min excerpt

John Allspaw, formerly of Etsy, popularised the 'blameless post-mortem' — a review that treats operators as the local experts on their own decisions, and treats bad outcomes as system signals rather than individual failings. Listen for the sentence he refuses to allow into the document.

Faixa em produção. O player aparece aqui — o áudio será publicado em breve. Enquanto isso, use o script completo abaixo.

1. LISTEN FOR GIST

- 1. Which single sentence, in Allspaw's view, ends the value of a post-mortem?
Answer key: 'She should have known better.'
- 2. What replaces that sentence in the blameless version?
Answer key: A minute-by-minute reconstruction of what was legible to the operator, and what a reasonable engineer would have concluded.

2. LISTEN FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why does Allspaw call the reframing 'technically stricter, not soft'?
Answer key: Because it demands a detailed reconstruction of the operator's information environment, not a vague verdict.
- 2. What leading indicator disappears in a blame culture?
Answer key: Voluntary reporting of near-misses.
- 3. What is the eighteen-month payoff of a blameless approach?
Answer key: Operators surface the near-misses that are the leading indicator of the next outage.

3. GLOSSARY

operator

the person actually at the controls when the incident happened

legible

here: visible and interpretable on the screen at the moment

near-miss

a moment when a bad outcome was narrowly avoided

system problem vs person problem

Allspaw's core distinction — the root cause is almost always structural

FULL SCRIPT

The single most important move in a post-mortem, if you want the organisation to keep learning, is to remove the sentence 'she should have known better' from the document. The moment that sentence is admitted, the review is over — everybody in the room now understands that the purpose of the exercise is to identify the person whose foresight failed, and the incentive to explain what you did and why quietly evaporates.

The reframing is not soft. It is technically stricter. You are asking the operator to reconstruct, minute by minute, what was legible on their screen, what was ambiguous, what was noisy, and — crucially — what a reasonable engineer would have concluded from that same picture. If your answer to 'why did she do that?' is 'because it was the reasonable thing to do given what she could see', you have a system problem, not a person problem. If your answer is 'because she wasn't paying attention', you have almost certainly stopped listening.

The organisational payoff, over eighteen months, is that operators start volunteering the near-misses — the moments they nearly did the wrong thing but caught it. Those near-misses are the leading indicator of your next outage; they are also, unfortunately, the first thing that stops arriving in a blame culture.

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Where in your organisation is 'should have known better' still an admissible sentence?
- How many near-misses did your team surface, voluntarily, last quarter?
- Is there ever a legitimate place for a 'person problem' framing?

GRAMMAR

Modal perfects — the language of retrospective judgment

18 min

Regret with responsibility: should have + past participle, ought to have + PP — I own the miss.

Retrospective possibility: could have + PP, might have + PP — a different outcome was available.

Confident hypothetical outcome: would have + PP — given a specific counterfactual, this is what would have followed.

Refused necessity: needn't have + PP — the action was taken but was not, in fact, required.

C1+ speakers use modal perfects to own a miss without being crushed by it — and to describe an alternative past without pretending it was obvious.

Choose the correct option.

- The pivot was correct — but we ____ six months earlier.
 - (a) should have moved
 - (b) should moved
 - (c) should have to move
 - (d) should be moving

Answer key: (a) should have moved

- Given what we knew in Q2, we ____ the same call again.
 - (a) would have made
 - (b) would made
 - (c) would have make
 - (d) would be making*Answer key: (a) would have made*
- Honestly, we ____ that customer if we'd listened to Sales in January.
 - (a) might not have lost
 - (b) might not lose
 - (c) might have lost not
 - (d) might not been lost*Answer key: (a) might not have lost*
- In hindsight, the board ____ the CEO more room to run the experiment.
 - (a) could have given
 - (b) could gave
 - (c) could have gave
 - (d) could have to give*Answer key: (a) could have given*
- We ____ that risk — it was legible in the data from month one.
 - (a) ought to have seen
 - (b) ought seen
 - (c) ought to seen
 - (d) ought to have saw*Answer key: (a) ought to have seen*
- The launch went well; even so, we ____ tighter on the messaging.
 - (a) could have been
 - (b) could been
 - (c) could have being
 - (d) could to have been*Answer key: (a) could have been*
- The team ____ the outage if the runbook had been current.
 - (a) would have contained
 - (b) would contained
 - (c) would have containing
 - (d) would have contain*Answer key: (a) would have contained*
- It ____ a disaster; the numbers say otherwise.
 - (a) needn't have been
 - (b) needn't be
 - (c) needn't have being
 - (d) needn't to have been*Answer key: (a) needn't have been*

Complete each retrospective with the appropriate modal perfect.

- Regret with responsibility: 'We didn't listen to Sales.' We should have listened_ should have listened_ to Sales.
- Speculation on a better past: 'Perhaps the launch was survivable.' The launch might have been_ might have been_ survivable.
- Retrospective possibility: 'It was possible for us to keep them.' We could have kept_ could have kept_ them.

- Confident retrospective: 'It wasn't necessary to fire her.' We needn't have fired_ needn't have fired_ her.
- Judged unfulfilled duty: 'We had a duty to warn the board.' We ought to have_ ought to have_ ought to have_ warned the board.

Discursive practice:

should have

might have

would have

DESCRIBE THE SITUATION

Look at the picture and use the grammar you just studied

You are the CEO drafting the opening two minutes of tomorrow's blameless post-mortem. Write 5–6 sentences using at least three different modal perfects.

TRY TO USE

We should have...

We ought to have...

We could have...

It might have been...

We needn't have...

SAMPLE ANSWER

We shipped on the eleventh, and — with the benefit of hindsight — we ought to have shipped a smaller version four weeks earlier. Granted, the data in September did not shout for the smaller version; it whispered. That said, we should have read the churn cohort more attentively than we did, and we could have caught the messaging drift in the first week of October. It might have been a quieter quarter; it wasn't. What I want to be careful of, this morning, is the sentence 'we should have known' — because on the information we had, that sentence is not, in fact, true. What is true is that we needn't have deferred the enterprise SKU, and the room ought to have said so.

VIDEO LESSON · REAL SPEAKERS

Blameless post-mortems — what they are and why they work

Source: John Allspaw (formerly Etsy) · conference talk

C1+

□ 15 min

John Allspaw, one of the original architects of the blameless post-mortem, explains why the standard 'root cause' framing produces less learning than the alternative — and what to say instead.

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. Allspaw's central objection to the phrase 'root cause' is that:
Answer key: It over-simplifies incidents that always have multiple contributing conditions, and closes the investigation prematurely.

- 2. The sentence he wants to remove from the document is:
Answer key: 'She should have known better.'
- 3. The alternative he proposes is a reconstruction of:
Answer key: What was legible to the operator at the moment of the decision — minute by minute.

2. WATCH FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why does he call the blameless approach 'technically stricter, not softer'?
Answer key: Because it demands a more detailed reconstruction of the operator's information environment than a verdict-style review does.
- 2. What leading indicator disappears in a blame culture?
Answer key: The voluntary reporting of near-misses.
- 3. What is the eighteen-month payoff?
Answer key: Operators surface the near-misses that predict the next outage.

3. KEY LANGUAGE

root cause (and why it's misleading)

the singular 'because' that closes the analysis too early

operator

the person actually at the controls when the incident happened

near-miss

a moment when the bad outcome was narrowly avoided

just culture

a review culture that treats people as local experts on their own decisions

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- When did you last write 'root cause' in a document that had more than one contributing condition?
- How many near-misses did your team surface, voluntarily, last quarter?
- Where in your organisation is 'she should have known better' still the default sentence?

SPEAKING

Own the miss, defend the decision

15 min

Task 1 — Solo (2 min): Prepare, out loud, a 90-second retrospective on a decision from the last twelve months whose outcome was worse than you expected. Distinguish the decision from the outcome.

Task 2 — Solo delivery (8 min): Record yourself delivering the retrospective. Then re-record, forcing yourself to include at least three different modal perfects (should/might/could/ought to have) — and one explicit sentence that names the hindsight bias in your own account.

Speaking challenge: Repeat your 90 seconds a third time and, this time, end with the sentence: "It was a reasonable call, on the information we had, and the outcome was still bad." If you cannot say it truthfully, say instead what makes it false — and why.

Teacher notes

Coaching: Watch for two failure modes — the crushed retrospective (all regret, no analysis) and the defensive retrospective (all analysis, no ownership). C1 register lives between them.

Record your answer

WRITING

A blameless post-mortem — one page

25 min homework

Task (240–280 words): Write the first page of a blameless post-mortem for a decision you owned in the last twelve months. Structure it: Decision · Information available at the time · Outcome · What we would have needed to see to have made the other call · Operational change for next quarter.

Requirements:

- Use at least four modal perfects, at least three of which own a miss without collapsing.
- Include one explicit sentence that names hindsight bias in your own account.
- End with one operational change specific enough that a colleague could implement it on Monday.

Re-read your draft the following day and underline every sentence that a blameless post-mortem could not keep. Redraft each one.

WRAP-UP

Consolidate before you leave

5 min

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

- Name one decision from your last quarter whose outcome was bad and whose decision was defensible.
- Which modal perfect do you overuse against yourself? Which do you refuse to use against yourself?
- Give one example of a 'should have known' sentence in your organisation that ought to be redrafted as an 'ought to have read'.
- One thing you will stop saying in retrospectives; one thing you will start.

- Rate your last post-mortem 1-5 on: honesty / hindsight-hygiene / operational output / follow-through. Which is weakest?

Take-away:

WORKBOOK · HOME PRACTICE

Unit 3A Workbook

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

VOCABULARY

Retrospection & the honest review

8 min

- A 'blameless post-mortem' is one that:
 - (a) names the individual responsible
 - (b) separates the decision from the outcome
 - (c) avoids discussing the incident
 - (d) is written by legal*Answer key: (b) separates the decision from the outcome*
- 'In hindsight' most naturally precedes:
 - (a) a live forecast
 - (b) a retrospective judgement
 - (c) a KPI
 - (d) a bid*Answer key: (b) a retrospective judgement*
- If a decision was 'defensible at the time', it means:
 - (a) it was the right decision
 - (b) the information available then justified it
 - (c) it was popular
 - (d) it was cheap*Answer key: (b) the information available then justified it*
- 'Hindsight bias' is:
 - (a) overweighting what is now obvious
 - (b) distrusting old data
 - (c) preferring senior voices
 - (d) risk-aversion*Answer key: (a) overweighting what is now obvious*
- A 'pivot' in the strategy sense is:
 - (a) a small pricing tweak
 - (b) a substantive change of direction after learning
 - (c) a management reshuffle
 - (d) a rebrand*Answer key: (b) a substantive change of direction after learning*

GRAMMAR

Past narrative tenses & the blameless post-mortem register

12 min

- By the time the board convened, the customer ____ already ____.
 - (a) had / churned
 - (b) has / churned
 - (c) was / churning
 - (d) would / churn*Answer key: (a) had / churned*

- We ____ on that assumption for months before anyone stress-tested it.
 - (a) were operating
 - (b) have operated
 - (c) operated
 - (d) had been operating

Answer key: (d) had been operating
- Given what we knew then, the decision ____ defensible.
 - (a) is
 - (b) was
 - (c) had been
 - (d) would be

Answer key: (b) was
- Looking back, we ____ the second cohort's data too quickly.
 - (a) dismissed
 - (b) had dismissed
 - (c) were dismissing
 - (d) have dismissed

Answer key: (a) dismissed
- The team ____ the model for eight weeks when the anomaly surfaced.
 - (a) ran
 - (b) had been running
 - (c) was running
 - (d) has been running

Answer key: (b) had been running
- ____ the outage happened, the on-call had already flagged the memory leak.
 - (a) By the time
 - (b) As long as
 - (c) Given that
 - (d) Insofar as

Answer key: (a) By the time

Now rewrite each sentence using the phrase in bold.

- Rewrite starting 'By the time...': 'The board met. The customer had already left.' By the time_ the board met, the customer had already left.
- Add the honest hedge: 'The call was reasonable.' The call was defensible at the time_ defensible at the time_ defensible at the time_ defensible at the time_.
- Add the retrospective marker: 'The model was wrong.' In hindsight_, the model was wrong — but only in part.
- Rewrite with past perfect continuous: 'We used that framework for a year before the shift.' We had been running_ had been running_ had been running_ that framework for a year when the shift hit.
- Frame the epistemic scope: 'The decision was rational.' given what we knew_ given what we knew_ given what we knew_ given what we knew_, the decision was rational.

WRITING

A one-page blameless post-mortem

20 min

Task (160–200 words): Draft the first two paragraphs of a blameless post-mortem for an incident (real or fictional). Paragraph 1: what actually happened, in past narrative tenses. Paragraph 2:

what the decision looked like at the time — and what only hindsight has surfaced.

- Use at least three past narrative tenses (past simple, past continuous, past perfect, past perfect continuous).
- Include the phrases in hindsight and defensible at the time.
- Do not name individuals; describe roles.
- Avoid the words fault, failure and mistake.

Teacher notes

Marking focus: Are the tenses actually doing narrative work? Is the retrospection honest without being punitive?
