



APEX ENGLISH · A2 BUSINESS

Unit A2-8B

What happened yesterday

Problems at work — the after-action conversation

What happened yesterday

Problems at work — the after-action conversation · A2+ · 55-65 min · Business English



“Yesterday's mistake is tomorrow's checklist — if you write it down.”

— Rule of the learning company

Objectives

- Run a short, blame-free after-action review using past simple and past perfect.
- Distinguish what happened, what caused it, and what we'll change — as three separate conversations.
- Write a 120-150 word 'lessons learned' note that a real team would actually read.
- Push back politely when someone tries to close an incident before its root cause is understood.

Class Book

Warm-up · Quick starter

Solo · about you · 4 min

Think through these three questions before we start.

- When did you last hold a proper 'what happened yesterday' conversation at work? How long did it last?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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- In your team, is it easier to admit a mistake to your boss or to your peers? Why?
 - One phrase you often hear that quietly kills honest after-action reviews (e.g. 'mistakes were made', 'we all learned a lot').
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Lead-in · The 15-minute post-mortem

Role cards · four voices in the room · 8 min

Yesterday, a client-facing report went out with the wrong quarterly figures. This morning, four people are sitting around a table for a 15-minute post-mortem. Pick a card and prepare TWO sentences that role would open with — using past simple and past perfect. Then compare in pairs.

Follow-up: Notice how the four openings differ. Same incident, four legitimate angles.

Reading · A hard day for Sofia

10 min

Sofia had been working from home for almost two years when yesterday happened. On paper, it was a normal Wednesday. In practice, it was the kind of day that ends with a walk around the block and a very early bedtime.

At 08:55, five minutes before her first meeting, her laptop refused to boot. She had already prepared a slide deck, rehearsed her opening, and made coffee — and now she was staring at a dead screen. She called IT. They took three hours. Meanwhile, she joined the meeting from her phone and did what she could.

At 13:00 she had a video call with a prospective client she had been chasing for six weeks. Camera off — because it wasn't working. She apologised, made a small joke, and led the call on voice alone. It went better than she had feared. The client even said, at the end: 'You clearly know your subject — the camera didn't matter.'

At 17:00, the internet stopped for thirty-two minutes. She had already sent the most urgent messages, so she pulled out a paper notebook and wrote her to-do list for tomorrow the old-fashioned way. It felt strangely calming.

At 18:15, she closed the laptop. Nothing had gone catastrophically wrong. Everything had gone slightly wrong. And that, she realised, was the interesting story: how a chain of small, unrelated failures had turned into a hard day — and why she was, on balance, actually quite proud of how she'd handled each one.

Comprehension check

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. What is the writer's main point about Sofia's day?

- ☐ **A.** Working from home is inherently unreliable
- ☐ **B.** Small, unrelated failures added up — but her responses were consistently good
- ☐ **C.** IT departments are always slow

2. Why did the video call 'go better than she had feared'?

- ☐ **A.** Because the camera fixed itself
- ☐ **B.** Because content and presence mattered more than the visual
- ☐ **C.** Because the client was easy-going

3. The paper notebook detail is included to show that...

- ☐ **A.** Old methods are always better
- ☐ **B.** Losing a tool didn't destroy her productivity — she adapted
- ☐ **C.** The internet is not reliable

True, False or Not Given?

Choose based on the text only.

1. Sofia had prepared her opening before her laptop failed.

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

2. The client signed the contract at the end of the video call.

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

3. The internet outage lasted more than half an hour.

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

About the text — think and write

Answer briefly, then complete the discursive task.

1. Why does the writer use past perfect ('she had already prepared... she had been chasing...') rather than only past simple?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. Which of Sofia's three responses is the most transferable to your job — and why?

3. ****Discursive task (100–130 words).**** The last paragraph claims that the interesting story is not the failures but the responses. Do you agree? Write a short reflection on a day of your own — real or realistic — where 'everything went slightly wrong'. Describe the chain, describe your responses, and finish with what you would keep doing next time.

Vocabulary · After-action review

10 min

Roles

Term	Meaning
hindsight	understanding of a situation only after it has happened
contributing factor	one of several causes — not the single cause
systemic	built into the process, not caused by an individual
corrective action	a specific change made to prevent a repeat
near-miss	something that almost went wrong — worth reviewing even without damage
single point of failure	one person, tool or step whose failure breaks the whole chain

Smalltalk

Term	Meaning
with the benefit of hindsight	looking back with what we know now
at first glance	when we first looked at it
in the heat of the moment	while it was happening, under pressure
on reflection	after thinking calmly about it
as it turned out	in the end, the reality was
in fairness to X	polite way to defend someone before critiquing the situation

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Practice

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

1. This wasn't a one-off — it's a ___ issue with how we hand over between shifts.
2. The tired analyst was a ___, but the real cause is that only one person can approve the file.
3. Only one person knew the password — that's a textbook ___ _ _ _.
4. ___ _ _ _ _ , we should have double-checked the totals before sending.
5. Yesterday's incident is a ___ — the client didn't notice, but it easily could have gone public.
6. ___ _ _ _ , the manager was already juggling three deliverables when he approved the file.

Collocations · review-meeting phrases

Match each verb with the correct noun / phrase.

Term	Meaning
draw	a lesson
identify	a contributing factor
circulate	the post-mortem notes
assign	a corrective action
close	the loop with the client
prevent	a repeat

Odd one out — which is NOT blame-free?

Choose the phrase that quietly shifts blame onto a person.

1. In a healthy post-mortem, which phrase would you challenge?
 - ☐ **A.** The process didn't force a second check.
 - ☐ **B.** Ana approved it too quickly.
 - ☐ **C.** There was no automated validation step.
 - ☐ **D.** The handover time was too tight.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. Which is a real learning statement?

- ☐ **A.** We learned a lot.
- ☐ **B.** Going forward, we'll do better.
- ☐ **C.** From next week, no client file goes out without a second signature.
- ☐ **D.** It won't happen again.

Grammar · past simple vs. past perfect (before yesterday)

14 min

1. Past simple — yesterday's events, in order

- At 08:55, her laptop refused to boot.
- She called IT.
- She joined the meeting from her phone.

2. Past perfect — what had already happened BEFORE that

had + past participle. Use to show that one action was already complete before another past action.

- She had already prepared the deck (before the laptop died).
- She had been chasing that client for six weeks (before the video call).

3. Why it matters in an after-action review

Past perfect lets you separate the preparation from the failure. It signals: 'this wasn't caused by lack of readiness'. Managers who never use past perfect sound like they're accusing.

- Compare: 'She sent the wrong file.' vs. 'She had reviewed the file twice before she sent it.'

4. Signal words

already · just · by the time · before · until then → often trigger past perfect.

- By the time the client called, we had already spotted the error.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise A — Choose past simple or past perfect

Complete with the correct form.

1. By the time IT ___ (call) back, Sofia ___ (already / run) the meeting from her phone.

2. She ___ (send) the deck the night before, so when the laptop ___ (die), the client still ___ (have) the material.

3. Until yesterday, we ___ (never / lose) a file this way — the incident ___ (expose) a real gap.

4. The manager ___ (approve) the numbers at 18:40, but he ___ (not / open) the appendix.

5. By 17:32 the internet ___ (be back), and Sofia ___ (already / rewrite) her to-do list on paper.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise B — Rewrite so past perfect appears

Combine each pair into ONE sentence using past perfect + past simple, showing the earlier action first with past perfect.

1. She prepared the deck. + Then the laptop died.

2. He skimmed the file. + Then he approved it.

3. The team missed the error. + Then the client called.

4. We tested the workaround. + Then we deployed it.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise C — Discursive: after-action note (80-100 words)

Write a short 'what happened yesterday' note about a real or realistic incident. Use AT LEAST 3 past perfect verbs and 3 past simple verbs. Show clearly what was ALREADY in place before things went wrong.

1. Start with: 'Yesterday afternoon, by the time we noticed the issue, we had already _____, but we hadn't _____.'

Describe the picture



Look at the picture. In 5-6 sentences, describe (a) what she is doing NOW, (b) what she had already done earlier that day, and (c) what she probably hasn't done yet. Use past simple, past perfect and one 'by the time...' clause.

Target language: By the time [event], she had already ... · Earlier in the day, she ... · She hadn't yet ... · Now she is ... · Tomorrow she'll probably ...

Listening · A blame-free 15-minute post-mortem (chair's summary)

10 min

The head of department gives a 90-second wrap-up at the end of a 15-minute post-mortem meeting. One voice (female).

Before you listen

- What ratio of 'what happened' / 'why' / 'what we'll change' would you expect in a good wrap-up?
- Which sentence would you personally find hardest to say out loud in front of your team?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Gist

1. What kind of meeting is this and who is speaking?

2. What is the chair's overall attitude?

Detail

1. What ALREADY existed before the incident that turned out not to be enough?

2. What is the ONE corrective action agreed?

3. What does the chair explicitly refuse to do?

Listen and complete

Complete with the exact words the speaker uses.

1. 'By the time the client called, we ___ ___ ___ the error ourselves — that matters.'

2. 'This isn't about one person; it's about a ___ that only asked for one signature.'

3. 'From ___ ___, no client file with figures leaves this team with fewer than two named approvers.'

Post-mortem phrases

Match each phrase to its function.

Term	Meaning
Let me play back what I've heard...	summarise before deciding
With the benefit of hindsight...	signal that you know it's easy to say now
This isn't about one person...	reframe from blame to system
The one thing we'll change is...	commit to a single, concrete action
Who owns this by when?	assign accountability with a date

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Speaking · Run the review

10 min

Use the target grammar and the post-mortem phrases to run these three tasks with a partner.

Writing · Lessons-learned note (120-150 words)

12 min (or homework)

Write a short 'lessons learned' note that would be sent to your team the morning after the incident. Include: (a) a one-paragraph timeline using past simple + past perfect, (b) one systemic 'why' (not a person), (c) ONE corrective action with a named owner and a date, (d) one honest sentence about what you would say to the client. Do NOT use the phrases 'mistakes were made', 'lessons learned' (in the body — the title is fine), or 'we'll do better'.

Workbook

What happened yesterday — Workbook

1. Vocabulary in context

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

1. This wasn't one person's bad day — it's a ___ issue with how we hand over between shifts.
2. The tired analyst was a ___, but the real cause is that only one person can approve the file.
3. Only Ricardo knows the deploy password. That's a textbook ___.
4. With the benefit of ___, we should have double-checked the totals before sending.
5. Yesterday's incident was a ___ — the client didn't notice, but it easily could have gone public.
6. ___ Miguel, he was already juggling three deliverables when he approved the file.
7. ___, I overreacted — I've since apologised to Ana in the team channel.
8. The one ___ we agreed: a second named approver on any client file with figures.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. Past simple vs. past perfect

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

1. By the time IT ___ (call) back, Sofia ___ (already / run) the meeting from her phone.
 2. She ___ (send) the deck the night before, so when the laptop ___ (die) the client still ___ (have) the material.
 3. Until yesterday, we ___ (never / lose) a file this way — the incident ___ (expose) a real gap.
 4. The manager ___ (approve) the numbers at 18:40, but he ___ (not / open) the appendix.
 5. By 17:32 the internet ___ (be) back, and Sofia ___ (already / rewrite) her to-do list on paper.
 6. By the time the client ___ (phone) at 16:20, Ana ___ (already / flag) the error in the team channel.
 7. In fairness to Miguel, he ___ (not / see) the appendix — nobody ___ (ever / tell) him it existed.
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3. Post-mortem hygiene

Choose the option that belongs in a blame-free, effective after-action review.

1. Best chair opening for a 15-minute post-mortem:
 - ☐ A. OK, so who's to blame here?
 - ☐ B. Let me play back what I've heard, and then we agree ONE change. Just one.
 - ☐ C. This is not a witch hunt but...
2. Which framing is systemic (not personal)?
 - ☐ A. Ana approved it too quickly.
 - ☐ B. The process didn't require a second signature on figures.
 - ☐ C. Miguel should have checked the appendix.
3. The strongest corrective action is:
 - ☐ A. We'll all be more careful.
 - ☐ B. Going forward we'll aim to do better.
 - ☐ C. From next Monday, no client file with figures leaves without two named approvers — Ana drafts the checklist by Friday.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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4. 'This will happen again in a different form' is a healthy thing to say because...
- ☐ A. It lowers expectations.
 - ☐ B. It's honest — the real question is not 'never again' but 'how fast will we notice next time?'.
 - ☐ C. It shifts the blame to the future.
5. Which sentence should NOT appear in the post-mortem note?
- ☐ A. The one thing we'll change is...
 - ☐ B. Owner: Ana. Deadline: Monday 09:00.
 - ☐ C. Mistakes were made and we all learned a lot.

4. Find and fix the mistake

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

1. By the time the client called we already spot the error.
 2. She had prepared the deck when the laptop died at 08:55.
 3. Until yesterday we never had lost a file this way.
 4. Ana approved it too quickly, that's the root cause.
 5. Going forward we'll aim to do better on these things.
 6. In fairness of Miguel, he was very busy.
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5. Reading & discursive response

Read the short case, then write your answer in 100–130 words.

1. Case: Your team has a strong culture of post-mortems for big incidents. However, near-misses — problems the client never noticed — are almost never reviewed, because 'nothing actually happened'. A colleague argues: 'We already have too many meetings; we can't post-mortem every close call.' In 100–130 words, argue for or against reviewing near-misses, using this unit's language (past perfect / past simple, systemic framing, single point of failure, contributing factor, etc.). Give ONE concrete near-miss from your own work.

6. Listening — chair's 90-second wrap-up

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

The head of department wraps up a 15-minute post-mortem meeting. Listen (or read the transcript) and answer.

1. What structure does the chair use — and why does it work?

2. What had ALREADY been done before the client called at 16:20?

3. How does the chair protect Ana specifically? Give TWO examples.

4. Why is the chair's line 'this will happen again in a different form' more useful than 'this won't happen again'?

7. Writing — Lessons-learned note (120-150 words)

Write a 'lessons learned' note to your team the morning after a real or realistic incident. Include: (1) a one-paragraph timeline using past simple + past perfect (show what had ALREADY been done before the failure), (2) one systemic 'why' (a process, not a person), (3) ONE corrective action with a named owner and a date, (4) one honest sentence to the team about what you'll say to the affected stakeholder. Do NOT use: 'mistakes were made', 'we'll do better', 'we all learned a lot'.

8. Case study preview

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

1. Reframe the case for Unit 8 as a systemic issue rather than a personal one. In one sentence: what is the real single point of failure?

2. If you were chairing the 15-minute post-mortem for this case, what would be your ONE corrective action, with a named owner and a date?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
