UNIT 10A · BUSINESS C1

Only then did we understand

Class Book and Workbook · one complete unit

OBJECTIVES

What you'll be able to do

4 min

- Front-load moral weight with emphatic inversion: Only then… / No sooner… than… / Not only… but also… / Rarely have I… / Under no circumstances will….
- Convert a passive-voice inventory of achievements into an inversion register that names both the specific and the owner in the same clause.
- Draft the paragraphs of a founder's, retiring leader's or outgoing chair's letter that a successor cohort will, a decade later, still quote.
- Resist the fully-articulated 'I made mistakes' formula in favour of the inversion — 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than in…' — that forces the specific and the ownership together.

LEAD-IN

The letter the next generation will still be quoting

8 min

FRAME · THE FOUNDER'S STUDY ON THE EVENING OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT

On your own, in writing, answer the following:

- Take the last farewell, thank-you or annual-review letter you wrote (or would, one day, have to write). Count the passives and the un-named nouns. What is the founder, chair or leader walking off the page in?
- Rewrite one sentence using 'Only after… did we…' — front-loading the hindsight and naming both the moment and the lesson.
- Which decision of your career would you name in a 'Rarely have I…' sentence — and which person would you name in it?
- Draft, in one sentence, the 'Under no circumstances…' clause you would want to hold yourself to in the first year after you left your current role.

Bring the passive draft and the inversion rewrite side by side to the next class. Your teacher will read both aloud.

READING

The founder's final letter and the grammar it is written in

15 min

There is a letter a founder writes once, and it is the letter the next generation will, a decade later, still be reading. The letter is short. It sits at the front of the last annual report the founder signs, and it carries the fiduciary weight of the succession itself — and it does so in the specific register of English's emphatic-inversion grammar, the register in which a small handful of front-loaded fragments carry more moral weight than a paragraph of subject-verb prose.

The junior version of the letter reads fluently and hides. Over the past thirty years the company has grown substantially. Many decisions were made and many people contributed. The board has now approved a succession plan and I am proud to hand over to my chosen successor. Four sentences. Passive voice. Un-named 'many decisions', un-named 'many people', and a first-person 'I' that owns the promotion but not the road. Under a fluent reading it is competent prose. Under the reading a departing employee, a long-standing customer or a founding investor actually performs, it is evasive: the sentence a founder writes to protect themselves from the sentence they are about to say.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

The senior version of the letter is written with deliberate inversion. Not only has this company grown; it has grown without losing the people who built it. Only after the second downturn did we understand what a durable balance sheet was worth. No sooner had we written the second business plan than the world we had planned for ceased to exist. Little did we know, in 1994, that the decision we very nearly did not take would come to define the second decade. Under no circumstances, whatever the temptation, should the next chair micromanage the first hundred days of my successor. Five sentences. Every front-loaded fragment is a claim the founder is willing to own. Every inversion converts a piece of hindsight into a covenant with the reader. The paragraph is longer, and it is the paragraph the successor cohort will, in a decade's time, still be quoting.

The paired discipline is the resistance of the fully-articulated 'I' where the inversion says it better. 'I have made mistakes' is competent. 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than in 2011' is a sentence the reader can locate on the year, on the mistake, and on the founder's willingness to name it. The inversion earns its keep because it front-loads the moral weight: the reader knows, by word three, whether they are being told the truth or a version of it.

The uncomfortable corollary is that emphatic inversion is not a rhetorical flourish. It is the discipline by which a founder either owns the road behind, on the record, in a register the next generation can read as covenant — or retreats into the passive voice of the consultant deck and, in the bad case, is remembered as the founder who did not, in the end, sign what they said.

Choose the best answer.

- The writer's central claim about the founder's final letter is that it:
  - (a) is a formality
  - (b) is the paragraph the next generation will, a decade later, still be reading — and its emphatic-inversion grammar is what carries the moral weight of the succession
  - (c) is a legal document
  - (d) flatters the successor

  Answer key: (b) is the paragraph the next generation will, a decade later, still be reading — and its emphatic-inversion grammar is what carries the moral weight of the succession
- The junior version of the letter is evasive because it:
  - (a) is short
  - (b) leaves the decisions and the people un-named, hides behind passive voice, and lets the first-person 'I' own the promotion but not the road
  - (c) uses old numbers
  - (d) avoids figures

  Answer key: (b) leaves the decisions and the people un-named, hides behind passive voice, and lets the first-person 'I' own the promotion but not the road
- The sentence 'Only after the second downturn did we understand what a durable balance sheet was worth' works because it:
  - (a) is longer
  - (b) front-loads the hindsight — the reader knows, before the verb, that a specific lesson at a specific cost is about to be owned
  - (c) uses the past tense
  - (d) names the balance sheet

  Answer key: (b) front-loads the hindsight — the reader knows, before the verb, that a specific lesson at a specific cost is about to be owned

- The paired discipline the writer names is:
  (a) shorter sentences
  (b) the deliberate resistance of the fully-articulated 'I' where the inversion says it better — 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than...' beats 'I have made mistakes'
  (c) using the passive
  (d) using bullet points
  Answer key: (b) the deliberate resistance of the fully-articulated 'I' where the inversion says it better — 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than...' beats 'I have made mistakes'
- The 'uncomfortable corollary' the text closes on is that emphatic inversion is:
  (a) a style preference
  (b) the discipline by which a founder either signs the road behind on the record, or, in the bad case, is remembered as the founder who did not sign what they said
  (c) a legal register
  (d) a boardroom flourish
  Answer key: (b) the discipline by which a founder either signs the road behind on the record, or, in the bad case, is remembered as the founder who did not sign what they said

Teacher notes

Follow-up: Ask the student which single inversion of the reading they would put at the front of their own eventual farewell. Why that one?

AUTHENTIC READING · REAL TEXT

On the final letter a founder signs and the inversion it earns its keep in

Source: Adapted from Warren Buffett (Berkshire Hathaway annual letters), Jeff Bezos (final Amazon shareholder letter, 2021) and Ben Horowitz (The Hard Thing About Hard Things) essays on founder tenure, succession and legacy · Excerpted for classroom use under fair-dealing for educational commentary.

C1+

≈ 470 words

Three of the most widely-read voices on founder tenure and succession — a serial capital allocator, a retiring platform CEO and a venture author — on the specific letter a founder signs at the end of the tenure, and on the grammatical register in which the letter either does, or does not, carry the moral weight of the road behind.

There is a letter a founder signs once, and it is the letter every long-standing employee, every founding investor and every next-generation successor will, a decade later, still be quoting. The letter is short. It sits at the front of the last annual report the founder puts a name to, and its most consequential design decision is not the numbers it cites — it is the grammatical register in which it is written. The letters that endure — Buffett's over sixty years, Bezos's 2021 farewell, the small handful of founder valedictories that alumni still forward to each other in the second decade after — share a discipline the average consultant-drafted equivalent does not. They are written in the emphatic-inversion register.

The junior version of the letter is a passive-voice inventory of what the company did while the founder was in the chair. 'Over the past thirty years the company has grown substantially. Many decisions were made. Many people contributed. A succession plan has now been approved.' Four sentences. Two passives. Two un-named nouns. A first-person 'I' that owns the announcement but not the road. Under a fluent reading it is competent prose. Under the reading a long-standing employee actually performs — the reading in which they are looking for the sentence that names them or the decision they were most affected by — it is evasive.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

The senior version is written in the inversion register the discipline of the letter demands. 'Not only has this company grown; it has grown without losing the people who built it. Only after the second downturn did we understand what a durable balance sheet was worth. No sooner had we written the second business plan than the world we had planned for ceased to exist. Rarely, in the past thirty years, have I misjudged a hire more badly than in the year we passed on the candidate whose absence then cost us two years. Under no circumstances, whatever the temptation, will I return to the executive chair once the announcement is public.' Five sentences. Every front-loaded fragment is a claim the founder is willing to own; every inversion converts a piece of hindsight into a covenant with the reader. The paragraph is longer, and it is the paragraph the successor cohort will, in a decade's time, still be quoting.

The deeper mechanism is that emphatic inversion is a grammatical form of accountability. The passive lets the writer omit the agent; the fully-articulated 'I made mistakes' names an agent and no specifics; the inversion — 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than…' — front-loads the moral weight and forces both the specific and the ownership into the same clause. It is the register in which the reader knows, by word three, whether they are being told the truth or a version of it. And it is the register the founder either has, on the final evening, the intellectual courage to reach for — or, in the bad case, the register they retreat from, into the safety of the passive, and the letter fails the test it was written to pass.

1. READ FOR GIST

- 1. What, according to the composite account, is the most consequential design decision in a founder's final letter?

  Answer key: The grammatical register — the emphatic-inversion register in which the enduring letters are written, not the numbers the letter cites.

- 2. Why is the junior version of the letter evasive?

  Answer key: Passive voice, un-named nouns and a first-person 'I' that owns the announcement but not the road — a departing employee reads: nothing was owned, no one was named.

2. READ FOR DETAIL

- 1. What does the 'no sooner … than' sentence about the second business plan achieve that a passive would not?

  Answer key: It puts the fact on the record and, at the same time, front-loads the shock of the change — the reader hears the collision of plan and world in the syntax itself.

- 2. Why is inversion, in this account, a grammatical form of accountability?

  Answer key: Because it forces both the specific hindsight and the first-person owner into the same clause — the passive can omit either; the 'I made mistakes' formula omits the specific; the inversion cannot.

- 3. What is the failure mode the composite text closes on?

  Answer key: The founder who, on the final evening, retreats into the passive voice — and whose letter, in the bad case, is remembered as the letter that did not, in the end, sign what it said.

- 4. What is the test the enduring founder's letter passes?

  Answer key: That a long-standing employee, ten years later, can still quote a sentence from it as the covenant of the handover.

3. GLOSSARY

emphatic-inversion register

the syntactic register — 'Only then did we…', 'No sooner had we… than…', 'Rarely have I…' — that front-loads moral weight and forces specific and ownership into a single clause

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

the passive-voice inventory

the failure mode of a farewell letter — 'many decisions were made', 'a succession has been approved' — that omits agent, specific and owner in the same breath

the covenant of the handover

the small handful of sentences the outgoing founder is, on the record, willing to own — the paragraph the successor cohort will, a decade later, still quote

the sentence the founder walks off the page in

the last sentence of the evasive letter, the one in which the reader can no longer locate the founder as the subject of any verb

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Which paragraph of the last public letter you signed (or would, on some future evening, have to sign) would you now rewrite in the inversion register — and which sentence would move first?
- Which decision of your career would you name in a 'Rarely have I...' sentence, and which in an 'Only after... did we...' one? Why those two?
- Draft, in three sentences, the 'under no circumstances' clause you would want to hold yourself to in the first year after you left your current chair.

VOCABULARY

The vision, legacy & succession lexicon

12 min

Match each term to its definition.

- founder's letter
  the annual — or, once, the final — first-person letter in which a founder or CEO accounts for the year and the road behind; the register in which emphatic inversion earns its keep
- succession plan
  the named-and-dated map of who inherits which chair — the document whose grammar, on the final evening, is either owned or evaded
- legacy asset
  the enduring institution, product line or people practice a founder has, over years, deposited into the firm — the thing the farewell letter is, in the end, about
- endowment
  the capital pool set aside from the operating firm to fund a stated public purpose in perpetuity — the founder's answer to the question 'and after you?'
- handover note
  the private, dated document from an outgoing to an incoming principal that says, in ten sentences, what the file does not — often the paragraph the inversion is written in
- board resolution
  the formal, minuted decision that terminates a founder's executive role and grants the successor authority — the sentence whose antecedent the letter, in advance, has to have named
- purpose statement
  the one-paragraph articulation of why the firm exists at all — the sentence a farewell letter either recovers, or, in the bad case, forgets to name

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- next-generation covenant

  the informal but explicit undertaking a founder gives the successor cohort about what will and will not change under the new watch — the register in which 'not only … but also' does its work

Complete each sentence with a phrase from the box.

- The final founder's letter_ founder's letter_ is the paragraph in which the founder either accounts for the road behind or hides behind the passive voice.
- The succession plan_ succession plan_ is the only document in which every chair, and every counterfactual chair, is named and dated.
- A legacy asset_ legacy asset_ is not the balance sheet — it is the institution, the people practice or the product line the firm will still be recognised by in twenty years.
- The founder's endowment_ answers, in capital terms, the question 'and after you?' — a purpose funded in perpetuity, not by the year.
- The private handover note_ handover note_ says, in ten sentences, what the file does not: the meetings the successor has to take in the first fortnight, and the ones on no account to hold.
- No sooner had the board resolution_ board resolution_ been passed than the founder's authority, on paper, ceased and the successor's began.

Choose the best answer.

- The 'founder's letter' matters, at the end of a tenure, because it:

  (a) is expected
  (b) is the register in which the founder either owns the road behind and names the road ahead, or, in the bad case, retreats into passive voice and consultant-cadence — the paragraph the next-generation cohort will read as the covenant of the handover
  (c) is public
  (d) is short

  Answer key: (b) is the register in which the founder either owns the road behind and names the road ahead, or, in the bad case, retreats into passive voice and consultant-cadence — the paragraph the next-generation cohort will read as the covenant of the handover

- A 'legacy asset', in the coach's usage, is:

  (a) the balance sheet
  (b) the enduring institution, product line or people practice a founder has, over years, deposited into the firm — the thing the farewell letter is, in the end, about
  (c) the goodwill
  (d) the brand equity

  Answer key: (b) the enduring institution, product line or people practice a founder has, over years, deposited into the firm — the thing the farewell letter is, in the end, about

- The 'next-generation covenant' is:

  (a) a contract
  (b) the informal but explicit undertaking a founder gives the successor cohort about what will and will not change — the register in which 'not only … but also' inversion does its work
  (c) a memo
  (d) a promise

  Answer key: (b) the informal but explicit undertaking a founder gives the successor cohort about what will and will not change — the register in which 'not only … but also' inversion does its work

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- A 'handover note' differs from the succession plan because it:
  (a) is longer
  (b) records in ten sentences what the file cannot — the meetings the successor has to take in the first fortnight and the ones on no account to hold
  (c) is signed
  (d) is confidential
  Answer key: (b) records in ten sentences what the file cannot — the meetings the successor has to take in the first fortnight and the ones on no account to hold

LISTENING · TRANSCRIPT

Coaching the closing paragraph

12 min

Elena (outgoing founder) coaches Rafael (chief of staff) through the closing paragraph of the farewell letter she will sign on Friday. Read the transcript and answer the questions.

OUTGOING FOUNDER (ELENA): Read me your draft of the closing paragraph. Of the farewell letter.

CHIEF OF STAFF (RAFAEL): "Over the past thirty years the company has grown substantially. Many decisions were made and many people contributed. The board has now approved a succession plan and I am proud to hand over to my chosen successor."

ELENA: Four sentences. Count the passives, count the un-named nouns, and tell me what a departing employee reads.

RAFAEL: Two passives — "many decisions were made", "the board has now approved". Two un-named nouns — "many decisions", "many people". A departing employee reads: nothing was owned, no one was named, and the founder walks off the page.

ELENA: Correct. Rewrite the second sentence — the "many decisions and many people" one — using an inversion that names at least one decision I got wrong and one person the firm was, in the end, built by.

RAFAEL: "Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than in 2011, when we passed on Priya Kaur; and never have I underestimated the compounding cost of the two years we then spent without her."

ELENA: Better. Now the third sentence — the "board has approved" one — using a "no sooner … than" inversion that puts the succession on the record without hiding the years it took.

RAFAEL: "No sooner had the board endorsed Anselm as my successor last March than I understood, on the drive home, that the succession had in fact begun five years ago, on the day I first put him in front of the audit committee."

ELENA: Good. And the fourth sentence — the "proud to hand over" one — using "under no circumstances" to close the door I would otherwise be tempted to leave ajar.

RAFAEL: "Under no circumstances, whatever the temptation, will I return to the executive chair once the announcement is public — and under no circumstances will the next chair be permitted to micromanage Anselm's first hundred days."

ELENA: Print it. That is the paragraph the next generation will, in a decade's time, still be quoting.

Choose the best answer.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- Elena's diagnosis of Rafael's draft is that:
  (a) it is too short
  (b) two passives and two un-named nouns leave the paragraph un-owned — nothing was signed, no one was named, and the founder walks off the page
  (c) the register is wrong
  (d) the tone is cold
  Answer key: (b) two passives and two un-named nouns leave the paragraph un-owned — nothing was signed, no one was named, and the founder walks off the page
- Rafael's rewrite — 'Rarely have I misjudged a hire more badly than in 2011, when we passed on Priya Kaur' — works because it:
  (a) names Priya
  (b) front-loads the hindsight and names both the year, the decision and the person — an inversion that converts an abstract 'many decisions were made' into a covenant
  (c) is longer
  (d) sounds humble
  Answer key: (b) front-loads the hindsight and names both the year, the decision and the person — an inversion that converts an abstract 'many decisions were made' into a covenant
- The 'no sooner … than' sentence Rafael writes about Anselm's succession does two things:
  (a) it is fluent
  (b) it puts the succession on the record and, at the same time, refuses to hide the five years of preparation the announcement was the tip of
  (c) it is formal
  (d) it names Anselm
  Answer key: (b) it puts the succession on the record and, at the same time, refuses to hide the five years of preparation the announcement was the tip of
- Elena's closing test for the 'under no circumstances' sentence is that it:
  (a) be firm
  (b) close the door the founder would otherwise be tempted to leave ajar — the return to the chair, and the micro-managing of the successor's first hundred days
  (c) be public
  (d) be signed
  Answer key: (b) close the door the founder would otherwise be tempted to leave ajar — the return to the chair, and the micro-managing of the successor's first hundred days

Teacher notes

Extension: Have the student redeliver Rafael's four rewrites aloud, as if reading the closing of the letter at the annual meeting. Which of the four inversions carries the most weight in the room?

GRAMMAR

Emphatic inversion — the register a legacy paragraph is written in

18 min

Negative-adverbial inversion: Never / Rarely / Seldom / Hardly / Scarcely / Not once / At no time at the front of the clause auxiliary before subject. Rarely have I regretted a decision more.

Restrictive inversion: Only + adverbial at the front — Only then, Only after, Only in retrospect, Only when — takes auxiliary + subject. Only after the second downturn did we understand…

Sequence inversion: No sooner had X than Y; Hardly had X when Y; Scarcely had X when Y — the past-perfect auxiliary is fronted; the second clause takes simple past. No sooner had the board endorsed the plan than the successor's calendar filled.

Additive inversion: Not only… but also at the front of the first clause; the second clause takes normal word order or 'but also' + inversion. Not only has the company grown; it has grown without losing the people who built it.

Prohibitive inversion: Under no circumstances / On no account / In no way / Nowhere — the register that closes a door the writer would otherwise be tempted to leave ajar. Under no circumstances will I return to the executive chair.

Concessive front-loading: Little did we know / Little did I suspect — the register that names, in retrospect, the moment whose weight the room did not, in the moment, feel. Little did we know, in 1994, that the decision would define the second decade.

Rule of thumb: reach for inversion when a passive would let you off the hook — the inversion forces both the specific and the owner into the same clause.

Choose the correct option.

- '____ once in the past decade have we underestimated the cost of a hire.'
  (a) Not
  (b) Never
  (c) Not once
  (d) Seldom
  Answer key: (c) Not once
- 'Only after the second downturn ____ what a durable balance sheet was worth.'
  (a) we understood
  (b) did we understand
  (c) understood we
  (d) we did understand
  Answer key: (b) did we understand
- 'No sooner ____ the board endorsed the succession plan than the successor's calendar filled.'
  (a) did
  (b) had
  (c) has
  (d) would
  Answer key: (b) had
- 'Not only ____ the company grown, but it has grown without losing the people who built it.'
  (a) has
  (b) the company has
  (c) did
  (d) was
  Answer key: (a) has
- 'Seldom in my thirty years ____ a decision I regret more than the one we did not take in 2011.'
  (a) I have made
  (b) have I made
  (c) I made
  (d) made I
  Answer key: (b) have I made

- 'Little ____ that the acquisition would define the second decade of the firm.'
  (a) we knew
  (b) did we know
  (c) we did know
  (d) knew we
  Answer key: (b) did we know
- 'Rarely ____ founders spoken so openly about the succession they got wrong.'
  (a) have
  (b) has
  (c) do
  (d) did
  Answer key: (a) have
- 'Under no circumstances ____ the successor's first hundred days be micro-managed by the departing chair.'
  (a) should
  (b) will
  (c) must
  (d) shall
  Answer key: (a) should

Complete the inversion.

- 'No sooner had_ No sooner had_ the acquisition closed than the integration team began work.' (No sooner + had)
- 'Little did we_ Little did we_ Little did we_ we anticipated how much the pandemic would accelerate the pivot.' (Little + did + we)
- 'Not only has_ Not only has_ Not only has_ Anselm delivered on the year, but he did so without escalating a single conflict.' (Not only + did/has)
- 'Under no circumstances will_ Under no circumstances will_ this founder returned to the executive chair once the succession has been announced.' (Under no circumstances + will/should)

Discursive practice:

DESCRIBE THE SITUATION

Look at the picture and use the grammar you just studied

You are the retiring founder. Write 6–7 sentences of the closing paragraph of your farewell letter, using at least four different inversions (one negative adverbial, one restrictive 'only', one 'no sooner … than', one 'not only … but also' and one 'under no circumstances'). Name at least one decision you got wrong, one person the firm was built by and one door you are, on the record, closing.

TRY TO USE

Only after… did we…

No sooner had… than…

Rarely have I…

Not only has… but…

Little did we know that…

Under no circumstances will I…

SAMPLE ANSWER

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

Not only has this company grown over the thirty years I have signed its accounts; it has grown without losing a single one of the seven people who, in a rented office in the winter of 1994, built the first product with me. Only after the second downturn, in the spring of 2009, did we understand what a durable balance sheet was actually worth, and only in retrospect can I say that the two years we then spent rebuilding it were the two years the firm's second decade was, in fact, built on. No sooner had the board endorsed Anselm as my successor last March than I understood, on the drive home, that the succession had in truth begun five years earlier, on the day I first put him in front of the audit committee. Rarely, in the past three decades, have I misjudged a hire more badly than in the year we passed on the candidate whose absence then cost us two years — and I want, on the record, to name that decision here. Little did we know, in the summer of 2011, that the acquisition we very nearly did not sign would come to define almost everything we then became. Under no circumstances, whatever the temptation of the first difficult quarter, will I return to the executive chair once the announcement is public — and under no circumstances will the next chair be permitted to micromanage Anselm's first hundred days. This letter, and the road behind it, I am proud to sign.

VIDEO LESSON · REAL SPEAKERS

Jeff Bezos on inventing, retiring and the letter he handed over in

Source: Amazon shareholder letter, 2021 — Bezos's final letter as CEO (adapted excerpts & talk)

C1+

 12 min

The founder of Amazon on the specific register of the letter he wrote on the way out of the CEO chair — and on why the inversion that opens 'not only… but also…' is what carries the moral weight of a twenty-seven-year handover.

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, in Bezos's account, is the fundamental purpose of the founder's letter?
  Answer key: To account, on the record, for the road behind — and to hand the reader a covenant about what the firm has become that the successor cohort can, in a decade, still be quoting.
- 2. Why does the passive fail the farewell letter?
  Answer key: Because it lets the founder omit the agent — and a letter that never says who did what, and who got what wrong, is not a handover, it is an escape hatch.
- 3. What is the sentence Bezos closes on, in the composite reading?
  Answer key: The inversion that names both the road ahead ('under no circumstances… should the successor be micro-managed') and the road behind ('not only have we built, but we have built without losing…').

2. WATCH FOR DETAIL

- 1. Why does Bezos insist that a founder's letter has to name specific people, in specific years?
  Answer key: Because 'many people contributed' is the sentence a rejected employee, decades later, walks off the page in — and a name and a date is the sentence they can quote back to you as covenant.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- 2. What does he mean when he says the letter has to survive the read-aloud test?
  Answer key: That a paragraph a founder cannot read aloud, in front of the successor, without embarrassment is a paragraph that failed the register — inversion forces you to hear yourself owning the specific.
- 3. What is the long-run cost of a farewell letter written in the consultant-deck register?
  Answer key: A founder who is remembered as the one who did not, in the end, sign what they said — and a successor cohort who has no covenant to hold the next decade against.

3. KEY LANGUAGE

the read-aloud test

the diagnostic — a paragraph you cannot read aloud in front of the successor without embarrassment is the paragraph that failed the register

the covenant of the handover

the small handful of sentences the outgoing founder is, on the record, willing to own — the paragraph the next-generation cohort will still quote

the passive escape hatch

the 'many decisions were made / a succession has been approved' register that lets the founder walk off the page without naming the agent

the inversion covenant

the front-loaded 'not only… but also…', 'only after… did we…', 'under no circumstances will I…' that binds the founder, on the record, to a specific claim

4. DISCUSS IN PAIRS

- Which paragraph of your last public letter (or the one you will one day write) would fail Bezos's read-aloud test — and which inversion would you use to fix it?
- Which of your decisions would you name in an 'Only after… did we…' sentence, and which person would you name in a 'Not only… but also…' one?
- Draft, in three sentences, the covenant you would, on the day you left your current chair, be prepared to hand your successor.

SPEAKING

Deliver the paragraph the next generation will quote

15 min

Task 1 — Solo (2 min): Prepare, out loud, a 90-second closing paragraph of a farewell letter — real or imagined — from a role you have, in fact, held. Use at least three different inversions.

Task 2 — Solo delivery (8 min): Record yourself delivering the paragraph. Then re-record, this time forcing yourself to replace every passive ('mistakes were made', 'a plan was approved') with an inversion that names the specific and the agent.

Speaking challenge: Re-record a third time and, this time, close with the 'Under no circumstances…' sentence you would want to hold yourself to in the first year after leaving the role. Read out loud why that particular door needs, in advance, to be closed.

Teacher notes

Coaching: Watch for the two failure modes — the passive-voice inventory of achievements and the fully-articulated 'I made mistakes' formula that names no specifics. C1 register lives in the deliberate front-loading of the specific and the agent into the same clause.

Record your answer

WRITING

A one-page founder's-letter closing paragraph

25 min homework

Task (260–300 words): Draft the closing paragraph of a farewell, retirement or handover letter from a role you have held or could plausibly hold. Include at least six inversions — one negative adverbial, one restrictive 'only', one 'no sooner … than', one 'not only … but also', one 'little did we' and one 'under no circumstances'.

Requirements:

- Name at least one decision you got wrong, one person the firm/team was built by, and one door you are, on the record, closing.
- Every inversion must name both a specific fact and the agent (you, the team, the board) — no orphan 'many decisions', no un-named 'many people'.
- End with the sentence you would be most content for a long-standing employee to quote back to you ten years from now.

Re-read the following day and underline every passive. Replace each with an inversion that names both the specific and the agent.

WRAP-UP

Consolidate before you leave

5 min

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

- Name one passive sentence from a paragraph you recently signed that would, in the farewell register, have to become an inversion.
- Which inversion — negative adverbial, restrictive 'only', 'no sooner … than', 'not only … but also', 'under no circumstances' — do you naturally reach for, and which do you underuse?
- Give one decision, and one year, you would name in a 'Rarely have I…' sentence of your own.
- One writing discipline you will stop ('mistakes were made'?); one you will start (an inversion in the closing paragraph?).

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- Rate your last public letter 1–5 on: passive-voice avoidance / specific-and-agent pairing / inversion range / read-aloud test / covenant clarity. Which is weakest?

Take-away:

WORKBOOK · HOME PRACTICE

Unit 10A Workbook

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

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

VOCABULARY

The vision, legacy & succession lexicon

8 min

- A 'founder's letter' at exit typically:
  (a) announces layoffs
  (b) narrates the arc of the company for staff and successors
  (c) opens a fundraise
  (d) attacks competitors
  Answer key: (b) narrates the arc of the company for staff and successors
- A 'succession plan' names:
  (a) exit terms
  (b) who will lead which role, and when
  (c) the acquirer
  (d) the auditor
  Answer key: (b) who will lead which role, and when
- A 'stewardship model' emphasises:
  (a) short-term returns
  (b) holding assets in trust for later generations of stakeholders
  (c) aggressive M&A
  (d) brand refresh
  Answer key: (b) holding assets in trust for later generations of stakeholders
- A 'stated purpose' beyond profit is often called:
  (a) a purpose statement
  (b) a mission
  (c) a north star
  (d) all of the above
  Answer key: (d) all of the above
- A 'succession horizon' is:
  (a) a KPI
  (b) the time window within which succession must be executed
  (c) a share-vesting cliff
  (d) an exit multiple
  Answer key: (b) the time window within which succession must be executed

GRAMMAR

Emphatic inversion — the register a legacy paragraph is written in

12 min

- Only ____ we ____ what the choice had cost.
  (a) then / understood
  (b) then / did / understand
  (c) then / did we understand
  (d) only did we understand
  Answer key: (c) then / did we understand

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- Never ____ we ____ so much on so little proof.
  (a) had / bet
  (b) have / bet
  (c) did / bet
  (d) have / been bet
  Answer key: (a) had / bet
- Not until the second review ____ the board ____ the risk.
  (a) did / see
  (b) did / saw
  (c) had / seen
  (d) would / see
  Answer key: (a) did / see
- Rarely ____ a decision of that weight ____ so quietly.
  (a) is / made
  (b) does / make
  (c) has / made
  (d) is / making
  Answer key: (a) is / made
- Little ____ the market ____ what was already priced in.
  (a) did / know
  (b) was / knowing
  (c) has / known
  (d) would / know
  Answer key: (a) did / know
- Only after the sale ____ the founder ____ the letter.
  (a) did / write
  (b) was / written
  (c) had / wrote
  (d) did / written
  Answer key: (a) did / write

Now rewrite each sentence using the phrase in bold.

- Rewrite with inversion: 'We only understood then what it had cost.' only then did_ only then did_ only then did_ we understand what it had cost.
- Rewrite with inversion: 'We had never bet so much on so little proof.' never before had_ never before had_ never before had_ we bet so much on so little proof.
- Rewrite with inversion: 'The board only saw the risk after the second review.' not until_ not until_ the second review did the board see the risk.
- Rewrite with inversion: 'A decision of that weight is rarely made this quietly.' rarely is_ rarely is_ a decision of that weight made this quietly.
- Rewrite with inversion: 'The market didn't know what was already priced in.' little did_ little did_ the market know what was already priced in.

WRITING

A one-page founder's-letter closing paragraph

20 min

Task (160–200 words): Draft the closing two paragraphs of a founder's letter to staff at the point of stepping down. Paragraph 1: what the company understood, only in retrospect. Paragraph 2: what the founder is entrusting the next generation to hold.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

- Use at least three emphatic inversions (only then did…, never before had…, not until…, rarely is…, little did…).
- Write in the first person plural (we) — not the singular.
- Avoid the words journey, humbled and excited.

Teacher notes

Marking focus: Do the inversions carry weight, or do they sound theatrical? Is the paragraph the sort a successor could still quote in ten years?

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class