



APEX ENGLISH

Your voice. Global.

B2 · BUSINESS ENGLISH

UNIT 3 · B3A

The customer story

Theme · Selling & Storytelling

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The customer story

Theme: Selling & Storytelling



Learning objectives

- Tell a 2-minute customer success story with a clear before / after.
- Use narrative tenses (past simple, past continuous, past perfect) accurately.
- Separate features, benefits and pain points in your own product language.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Class Book

Warm-up · Story bank

List **THREE** moments from your own work where something changed for a customer / user / client. Rank them from most to least tellable in a 2-minute story. Which one has the clearest 'before' and 'after'?

A customer who almost churned but stayed — what changed?

A user who did something with your product you never expected.

A client who complained hard, then became your loudest advocate.

A moment you personally felt 'this is why we built this'.

Lead-in: what's missing?

Match each flat story to the piece that's missing.

1. 'We deployed our platform and the client was happy.'

2. 'They were losing 20% of leads. We fixed it.'

3. 'It's an enterprise-grade, AI-driven solution.'

followUp: Which mistake does your team make most?

Reading: Before / How / After

A good B2B customer story has almost the same shape every time. Someone had a specific, expensive problem. Something happened. Now the problem is measurably smaller. Before, how, after — in about 90 seconds. Everything else is decoration.

The single most common mistake is skipping the 'before'. Sellers who know their product too well often open with 'We helped them roll out our platform', which lands with a shrug — the listener has no idea what changed, because they never heard what was broken. Compare that with 'They were losing about 40 hours of engineering time every week to the same three support tickets.' Now the listener is leaning in, because there is finally a number attached to the pain.

The 'how' is where features actually belong — but as verbs, not adjectives. Not 'our AI-powered classification engine', but 'we auto-routed the three ticket types their engineers hated most'. And the 'after' has to be a number the buyer would recognise as valuable: hours saved, deals closed, churn dropped, response time halved. If you can't quantify the after, the story is a testimonial, not a case study.

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1. According to the text, a good customer story has three parts. They are...
 - (A) Product, price, plan
 - (B) Before, how, after
 - (C) Client, competitor, contract
2. The most common mistake sellers make is...
 - (A) Talking too long
 - (B) Skipping the 'before' — the pain
 - (C) Using too many numbers
3. Features are best expressed as...
 - (A) Adjectives ('AI-powered')
 - (B) Verbs ('we auto-routed...')
 - (C) Product codes
4. Without a measurable 'after', the story becomes...
 - (A) A pitch
 - (B) A testimonial, not a case study
 - (C) A cold email

Vocabulary in context

Match the phrase to its meaning.

pain point — a specific, painful problem the customer feels regularly

roll out — deploy or launch something to users

flat (story) — technically correct but with no emotional pull

testimonial — an unquantified quote of praise

case study — a story of change with numbers attached

leaning in — engaged, paying closer attention

Vocabulary: features, benefits and pain points

feature — the precise technical capability the product delivers

benefit — the tangible value the customer derives from that capability

outcome — the quantifiable business result attributable to the intervention

use case — the specific job the customer hires the product to do

pain point — the specific hurt the buyer feels

friction — recurring micro-frictions that erode momentum and morale

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churn — customers leaving over time

bottleneck — the one step everything else is waiting on

workaround — the improvised, unsustainable fix teams tolerate before adoption

root cause — the real underlying reason for a problem

practice

Complete each sentence with ONE word / phrase.

1. The team's real ____ was that every export took 40 minutes and blocked the whole reporting cycle.

2. Before us, their ____ was a Google Sheet copied and pasted every Monday morning.

3. Auto-routing tickets is a ____; getting weekends back is the ____.

4. We didn't just fix the symptom — we found the ____: their onboarding email had a broken link.

5. The chief source of ____ emerged in month two, when trial users were forced to re-enter their card details.

6. Their ____ dropped from 6% to 2.4% in one quarter.

Practice 2 — collocations & rewrite

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

1. The team's real step that everything else was waiting on was that every export took 40 minutes.

2. Before us, their improvised, unsustainable fix was a Google Sheet copied and pasted every Monday.

3. Auto-routing tickets is a technical capability; getting weekends back is the tangible value.

4. We didn't just fix the symptom — we found the real underlying reason.

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5. The chief source of <u>recurring micro-friction</u> emerged in month two.

Practice 3 — discursive writing (business memo)

prompt: Write an analysis for the sales team comparing a failed testimonial with a successful case study you recently produced.

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

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

Include a clear recommendation or takeaway in the final sentence.

sample: Subject: Analysis — Why 'Testimonials' are Failing our Pipeline. I've reviewed our recent collateral and noticed that our 'customer success' slides are often landing flat because they lack a clear 'before' state. A quote saying 'the team loved the rollout' is a nice testimonial, but it doesn't solve a prospect's pain point. In contrast, our Northlake case study is winning because it identifies a specific bottleneck: 40 hours of manual reporting. By focusing on the root cause—a routing problem, not a data problem—we showed how we eliminated friction. The outcome was a measurable 75% reduction in analyst time. When we pitch, we must stop listing features as adjectives and start describing them as verbs that solve a specific use case. Prospects only start leaning in when they see a quantified 'after' that matches their own internal struggles with churn or workarounds.



Grammar focus: Narrative tenses for customer stories

1. Past simple — the spine of the story — For finished events, in order: • They signed with us in March. • We ran a two-week pilot. • Churn dropped by 60% in Q2.

2. Past continuous — the background at that moment — For what was already happening when the event took place: • They were losing 20% of leads every month when they contacted us. • Sales were dropping while marketing kept blaming pricing.

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3. Past perfect — the earlier past — For something that happened BEFORE the main past event — usually to explain why: • They had tried three other tools before they came to us. • By the time we met, their VP had already resigned.

4. Order matters — mix them like this — Typical opening: past continuous (situation) + past simple (event) + past perfect (cause). • 'They were leaking 20% of leads (background) when they called us (event). They had just lost their biggest customer (earlier cause).'

Exercise A — Choose the correct narrative tense

Put the verb in brackets in the best narrative tense.

1. When they signed with us, they ____ (already / try) three other tools.

2. Their team ____ (lose) about 40 hours a week to manual reporting at that point.

3. We ____ (run) a two-week pilot, and churn ____ (drop) from 6% to 2.4%.

4. By the time we met the CEO, marketing ____ (already / cut) the budget by half.

5. While the engineers ____ (fight) the bug, sales ____ (miss) their quarterly target.

6. It ____ (become) clear that the real bottleneck ____ (be) not the tool but the onboarding.

Exercise B — Fix the tense

Each customer-story line has ONE tense mistake. Rewrite it.

1. They tried three tools before, they came to us.

2. When we started, they were losing 20% of leads and had lost their biggest client the week before.

3. Sales were dropping fast, so we are running a pilot the next Monday.

4. By Q3, churn dropped from 6% to 2.4%.

Exercise C — Build a 3-sentence customer story

Use ONE past continuous (situation), ONE past simple (event), ONE past perfect (cause). Write 3 sentences.

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1. Client: a mid-sized e-commerce brand. Problem: they were losing 15% of carts. Cause: their checkout had gone from 3 to 6 steps in a redesign. →

2. Client: a B2B SaaS. Problem: engineers drowning in support. Cause: same three ticket types over and over. →

Listening: A 3-minute customer story — retold three ways

Three sellers from the same company each tell the SAME customer story to a prospect. One tells it as a feature list, one as a testimonial, one as a proper before-how-after case study.

pre

Which version do you predict will land best?

What TWO things will make the strong version stronger than the other two?

gist

1. Who is the customer being talked about?

2. What was the core problem?

3. Which of the three sellers tells a proper case study?

detail

1. What TWO things does Voice A talk about that a prospect doesn't care about yet?

2. How does Voice B end the story?

3. What is Voice C's specific 'after' number?

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Third listen — story craft

Focus on HOW each speaker builds (or fails to build) the story.

1. Voice A skips the 'before'. Why does that make the story flat, even though everything he says is technically true?

2. Voice B's version has emotion. Why is it still not a case study?

3. Voice C mixes narrative tenses on purpose. Find the past perfect line and explain what work it does.

Language from the audio — customer-story phrases

Match each phrase to what it DOES in the story.

"They were losing about 40 hours a week..." — opens with the pain, in numbers

"They had already tried two other tools." — past perfect — explains why the problem was still unsolved

"So we auto-routed the three ticket types..." — features expressed as verbs, not adjectives

"By week eight, it was down to nine hours." — measurable 'after' the prospect can benchmark against

"What that meant for the CFO was..." — translates outcome into buyer-language (money / risk)

"The interesting part is why nobody had spotted it." — hook that promises insight, keeps the prospect listening

Voice A: So, Northlake use our platform. It's fully enterprise-grade, obviously, with the AI-powered classification module, single sign-on, and our new analytics layer. They love the dashboards. Really strong rollout.

Voice B: Yeah — Northlake are amazing. The CEO actually said to us it was the best rollout he'd ever seen. Everyone in their head office is a fan. Genuinely, we get thank-you notes.

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Voice C: Okay — Northlake, 80 stores. When they came to us, their head-office analysts were losing about 40 hours a week to the same three types of store-level report — literally the same three questions, over and over. They had already tried two other tools before us and neither one had solved it, because both had treated it as a data problem. We treated it as a routing problem — we auto-routed those three report types straight to the store managers who owned the answer. By week eight, that 40 hours a week was down to about nine. What that meant for the CFO was he freed up more than a full analyst headcount, without firing anyone. The interesting part is why nobody had spotted it: those three questions weren't in anyone's job description.

Speaking: solo role-play — tell YOUR customer story

Solo task. Pick ONE scenario. Record yourself (voice note, 2–3 min) telling the story as if to a prospect at a coffee break. You MUST hit before → how → after, use at least ONE past perfect line, and end with ONE measurable number. Play back and self-score.

Scene: A real customer of yours (recommended)

A: You are the seller.

B: Imagined listener: a lookalike prospect who has never heard of you.

Scene: A make-believe HR SaaS win

A: Customer: a 300-person tech company drowning in reference-check emails.

B: Imagined listener: a Head of People at a similar-sized company.

Scene: A freelance / consulting win

A: You are the freelancer.

B: Imagined listener: another prospective client with the exact same problem your last client had.

Extra speaking task — 30-second retell

Now retell the SAME story in 30 seconds, as if you have only one elevator ride. You must keep the pain-number and the outcome-number; everything else is negotiable. Record and compare with your 2-minute version — which one is stronger?

Writing mini-task

Turn your spoken customer story into a 90–110 word written case-study paragraph. Structure it in three sentences: Before (with number), How (features as verbs), After (with number). Add ONE line explaining WHY the problem had gone unsolved before you.

Wrap-up

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



One 'before' number from your work you'll start opening with.

One feature you'll stop describing as an adjective and start describing as a verb.

One story from your quarter that deserves the case-study treatment.

Quiz

1. A good customer story has three parts. They are...
 - (A) Product, price, plan
 - (B) Before, how, after
 - (C) Team, tool, timing
2. The single most common mistake sellers make is...
 - (A) Talking too fast
 - (B) Skipping the 'before' — the pain in numbers
 - (C) Using too many numbers
3. 'They had already tried two other tools before they called us' uses the past perfect to...
 - (A) Sound formal
 - (B) Explain why the problem was still unsolved
 - (C) Fill time
4. The 'after' in a proper case study must be...
 - (A) A quote of praise
 - (B) A measurable number the buyer would recognise as valuable
 - (C) The product roadmap
5. Features are best expressed as...
 - (A) Adjectives
 - (B) Verbs — actions we performed for the customer
 - (C) Bullet points on a slide

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Workbook — home practice



Exercise 1 — Story vocabulary

Complete each sentence with *ONE* phrase from the box.

Word bank: pain point · workaround · bottleneck · churn · root cause · friction

1. Their team's real ____ was that every export took 40 minutes and blocked reporting.

2. Prior to our involvement, their ____ was a Google Sheet manually copied and pasted every Monday.

3. The main ____ was in month two, when trial users had to re-enter their card details.

4. Their ____ dropped from 6% to 2.4% in one quarter.

5. The customer's most acute ____ was that reference checks consumed three full days.

6. We didn't just fix the symptom — we found the ____: a broken link in the onboarding email.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



1b. Vocabulary — discursive writing

Write a 150-word executive summary of a successful project for a major client. Describe the situation before your intervention (using 'pain point' and 'bottleneck'), the solution you provided, and the measurable outcome (using 'churn' or 'friction').

id: vocab-discursive

type: writing

Use all 6 target vocabulary items.

Follow the Before-How-After structure.

Include specific (real or imagined) metrics.

Use past perfect for the 'Before' state.

model: Executive Summary: Northwind Logistics Optimization When we began our engagement with Northwind Logistics, their primary pain point was a manual data-entry process that had been in place for years. This created a massive bottleneck in their supply chain, delaying shipments by an average of 48 hours. The team had developed a complex workaround involving multiple spreadsheets, but this only increased the risk of error. We identified that the root cause was a lack of integration between their CRM and warehouse management system. By implementing our automated routing module, we removed the friction in the data flow. The results were immediate: shipping delays were eliminated within the first month. Most significantly, their customer churn rate dropped from 8% to 2.5% by the end of Q3. This project has not only saved thousands of manual hours but has also significantly improved their market reputation. We are now looking at scaling this solution to their European subsidiaries in the coming year.

Exercise 2 — Narrative tenses

Put the verb in brackets in the best narrative tense (past simple, past continuous, or past perfect).

1. When they signed with us, they ____ (already / try) two other tools.

2. Their analysts ____ (lose) about 40 hours a week to manual reporting at that point.

3. We ____ (run) a two-week pilot and churn ____ (drop) from 6% to 2.4%.

4. By Q3, cart abandonment ____ (fall) from 15% to 6%.

5. Sales ____ (drop) fast while engineering ____ (fight) a bug for three weeks.

6. It ____ (become) clear the real problem ____ (be) onboarding, not the tool.

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Exercise 3 — Feature, benefit or outcome?

Which is it?

1. 'Auto-routing tickets by role, not keyword.'
(A) feature
(B) benefit
(C) outcome
2. 'Engineers get their weekends back.'
(A) feature
(B) benefit
(C) outcome
3. 'Support hours dropped from 40/week to 9/week.'
(A) feature
(B) benefit
(C) outcome
4. 'Single sign-on with our identity provider.'
(A) feature
(B) benefit
(C) outcome
5. 'A full analyst headcount freed up without firing anyone.'
(A) feature
(B) benefit
(C) outcome

Exercise 4 — Fix the flat story line

Each customer-story sentence is missing ONE key part (before / how / after / cause). Rewrite it in ONE stronger sentence.

1. We deployed our platform and the client was very happy with the features.

2. They had a lot of problems before, and now they don't.

3. Their CEO said we were amazing.

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4. It's an enterprise-grade, AI-driven, cloud-native solution.

Exercise 5 — Three sellers, one story

You'll hear three sellers tell the SAME customer story to a prospect. One is a feature list. One is a testimonial. One is a proper case study.

1. Which version is the proper before-how-after case study?

2. Which version is a testimonial?

3. Which version is a feature list?

Voice A: Voice 1: So, Northlake use our platform. Enterprise-grade, obviously, with the AI classification module and single sign-on. Really strong rollout, they love the dashboards.

Voice B: Voice 2: Northlake are amazing. Their CEO said it was the best rollout he'd ever seen. Genuinely, we get thank-you notes. Everyone in head office is a fan.

Voice C: Voice 3: Northlake, 80 stores. Their analysts were losing 40 hours a week to the same three report types. We auto-routed them to the store managers who owned the answer, and within eight weeks it was down to nine hours a week. Freed up more than a full analyst headcount, without firing anyone.

Exercise 6 — Write your own 90-word case study

Turn a real customer / project / client win from your work into a 90–110 word paragraph. Three sentences: Before (with number), How (features as verbs), After (with number). Add ONE past-perfect line explaining WHY the problem had gone unsolved before you.

Exercise 7 — Case study reflection: 3 sellers, 1 story

Think about the Northlake / Vellum case. Answer the questions.

1. What is the ONE change you'd force EVERY seller to make in their version of the story?

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2. Rewrite the standardised 90-second version of the Northlake story.

3. What ONE monthly metric would you report to the founder to prove the story is landing better?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Answer key — Class Book

Lead-in: what's missing?

1. no BEFORE — no pain to compare
2. no HOW — the middle is invisible
3. no CUSTOMER — feature list, not a story

Reading: Before / How / After

1. (B) Before, how, after
2. (B) Skipping the 'before' — the pain
3. (B) Verbs ('we auto-routed...')
4. (B) A testimonial, not a case study

Vocabulary: features, benefits and pain points

1. bottleneck
2. workaround
3. feature; benefit
4. root cause
5. friction
6. churn
1. The team's real bottleneck was that every export took 40 minutes.
2. Before us, their workaround was a Google Sheet copied and pasted every Monday.
3. Auto-routing tickets is a feature; getting weekends back is the benefit.
4. We didn't just fix the symptom — we found the root cause.
5. The chief source of friction emerged in month two.

Grammar focus: Narrative tenses for customer stories

1. had already tried
2. was losing / were losing
3. ran; dropped
4. had already cut
5. were fighting; missed / were missing
6. became; was
1. They had tried three tools before they came to us. (earlier past → past perfect)
2. Fine as written — this is the correct mix of past continuous + past perfect.
3. Sales were dropping fast, so we ran a pilot the following Monday. (narrative → past simple, not present)
4. By Q3, churn had dropped from 6% to 2.4%. ('by Q3' + earlier past → past perfect)
1. Model: 'They were losing about 15% of carts every week when they called us. We rebuilt the checkout in eight days and cart-abandonment dropped to 6%. It turned out their previous agency had added three extra steps that nobody had ever tested with real users.'
2. Model: 'Their engineering team was losing about 40 hours a week to support tickets when we started. We auto-routed the three ticket types that were eating most of that time, and by month two the number was down to nine. They had actually solved the same three tickets manually more than 400 times before anyone noticed the pattern.'

Listening: A 3-minute customer story — retold three ways

1. Northlake Retail — an 80-store fashion retailer.
2. They were losing about 40 hours of head-office analyst time every week to manual store-level reporting.
3. Voice C — she opens with the pain (40 hours/week), names the intervention (auto-routing the three ticket types), and closes with numbers (down to 9 hours/week within eight weeks).
1. The platform name and its 'enterprise-grade architecture' — features with no pain attached.
2. With a quote — 'The CEO said it was the best rollout he'd ever seen' — no numbers.
3. 40 hours/week → 9 hours/week within 8 weeks.
1. Because the listener has no baseline of pain to compare the result against — 'they use our platform' is not a change.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



2. It's a testimonial — a quote of praise with no measurable outcome. A prospect can't calculate their own ROI from it.
3. 'They had tried two other tools before they called us' — it explains WHY the problem was still unsolved and quietly positions our win against known alternatives.

Quiz

1. (B) Before, how, after
2. (B) Skipping the 'before' — the pain in numbers
3. (B) Explain why the problem was still unsolved
4. (B) A measurable number the buyer would recognise as valuable
5. (B) Verbs — actions we performed for the customer

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Answer key — Workbook

Exercise 1 — Story vocabulary

1. bottleneck
2. workaround
3. friction
4. churn
5. pain point
6. root cause

Exercise 2 — Narrative tenses

1. had already tried
2. were losing
3. ran; dropped
4. had fallen
5. were dropping / dropped; were fighting
6. became; was

Exercise 3 — Feature, benefit or outcome?

1. (A) feature
2. (B) benefit
3. (C) outcome
4. (A) feature
5. (C) outcome

Exercise 4 — Fix the flat story line

1. Model: 'They were losing about 40 hours of engineering time a week when we came in; we auto-routed the three ticket types that were eating most of that time, and by week eight they were down to nine hours.'
2. Model: 'Before us, they were leaking 15% of carts every week — mostly at the shipping step. We rebuilt the checkout in eight days and cart abandonment dropped to 6%.'
3. Model: 'Their CEO said it was the best rollout he'd ever seen — but the harder number is that support hours dropped from 40/week to 9/week within two months.'
4. Model: 'For Northlake specifically: auto-routing three report types to the store managers who owned the answer, freeing about 31 analyst hours a week.'

Exercise 5 — Three sellers, one story

1. Voice 3 — opens with the 40h/week pain, names the intervention (auto-routing), closes with the 9h/week number.
2. Voice 2 — quote of praise from the CEO, no measurable outcome.
3. Voice 1 — 'enterprise-grade platform, AI classification, single sign-on' — no customer, no change.

Exercise 7 — Case study reflection: 3 sellers, 1 story

1. Model: force every version to open with the 40h/week pain number. It's the single change that already correlates with a 23-point win-rate lift.
2. Model: 'Northlake — 80 stores. Their analysts were losing about 40 hours a week to the same three report types, and they had already tried two tools that treated it as a data problem. We treated it as a routing problem, auto-routed those three types to the store managers, and within eight weeks that 40 hours was down to nine. For their CFO, that freed up more than a full analyst headcount — without firing anyone.'
3. Model: win rate on calls where the '40 → 9' number was actually said (measured from call transcripts). Everything else is opinion.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
