



APEX ENGLISH · A2 BUSINESS

Unit A2-7B

Something goes wrong: handling complaints professionally

The customer conversation

Student Edition · Classbook + Workbook

When something goes wrong: handling complaints professionally

The customer conversation · A2+/B1 · 60–70 min · Business English



“A complaint handled well can keep a customer for ten years. Handled badly, it loses ten customers in a week.”

— Service-recovery rule of thumb

Objectives

- Handle a customer complaint end-to-end: acknowledge, investigate, propose, confirm.
- Use past simple vs present perfect to describe what has and hasn't been done, and what happened when.
- Estimate the real cost of a poor complaint experience and defend a recovery plan.

Class Book

Warm-up · The last complaint you handled

Solo · about you · 4 min

Think for 60 seconds before answering out loud.

- What was the last complaint you handled — from a customer, a colleague, or a supplier?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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- How did you feel in the first 30 seconds?
 - What phrase did you use to acknowledge the problem before proposing a fix?
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Lead-in · Guess the cost

Price guess · pick the most likely number · 6 min

For each statement, pick the option you think is closest to reality. Then compare with the answers — some will surprise you.

Follow-up: Given these numbers, is spending an extra 10 minutes on a complaint worth it? Justify your answer in one sentence.

Reading · Why sorry isn't enough

10 min

For most of the twentieth century, the standard corporate response to a complaint was a formal apology, a small compensation, and a hope that the customer would go away quietly. It worked, at least statistically, because unhappy customers had limited reach: they could complain to a friend, maybe a local newspaper, and that was roughly it. In 2026, that model has broken. A single well-written negative review on the wrong platform can outperform an entire quarter of marketing spend, in reverse.

What's replaced 'apologise and move on' is a discipline sometimes called service recovery. The logic is counter-intuitive: a customer whose serious complaint has been handled quickly and generously ends up more loyal than a customer who never had a problem in the first place. The reason is human — trust is not built in easy moments, it's built in difficult ones. When a company demonstrates, under pressure, that it has taken your side, you remember it. You tell people about it.

The mechanics of service recovery are unglamorous but rigorous. Acknowledge the problem in the customer's own words before proposing anything. Investigate before promising. Offer more than the minimum, on purpose, because the marginal cost is almost always tiny compared to the marginal value of a retained customer. And follow up in writing, so the customer has a record. Companies that treat complaints as an information source, not a nuisance, quietly turn their unhappiest week into their most profitable one.

Comprehension check

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. The main argument of the text is that...

- ☐ **A.** complaints should be minimised at all costs.
- ☐ **B.** a well-handled complaint can build more loyalty than a smooth experience.
- ☐ **C.** written apologies are the best form of response.
- ☐ **D.** compensation is the most important element of recovery.

2. The 'counter-intuitive' finding mentioned is that...

- ☐ **A.** complaints are always financially negative.
- ☐ **B.** customers who never complain are the most loyal.
- ☐ **C.** customers whose complaints are handled well end up more loyal than those without problems.
- ☐ **D.** compensation destroys loyalty.

3. According to the text, why does the old 'apologise and move on' model no longer work?

- ☐ **A.** Because customers now have wide, digital reach.
- ☐ **B.** Because companies stopped apologising.
- ☐ **C.** Because compensation became more expensive.
- ☐ **D.** Because customers are less patient.

4. The tone of the article is best described as...

- ☐ **A.** sales-oriented.
- ☐ **B.** sceptical about complaint handling.
- ☐ **C.** analytical with practical recommendations.
- ☐ **D.** purely descriptive.

Reading reflection · discursive writing (100-130 words)

Write 100-130 words responding to the prompt. Use at least ONE example from your own workplace.

1. The article claims that a well-handled complaint can produce MORE loyalty than a smooth first experience. Does this match your reality as a customer AND as a professional? Where does the argument stop being true?

Vocabulary · Complaint-handling language

10 min

Roles

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Term	Meaning
acknowledge	confirm you have heard and taken the complaint seriously
investigate	look into what actually happened
root cause	the underlying reason for the problem
goodwill gesture	a small extra offered beyond what is strictly required
resolution	the agreed solution
escalate	pass the case to someone with more authority

Smalltalk

Term	Meaning
I completely understand your frustration	empathy statement
That's absolutely not the experience we want you to have	acknowledge without over-apologising
Let me look into this and get back to you	buy time to investigate properly
By way of apology, we'd like to offer...	introducing a goodwill gesture
I'd like to make this right for you	commit to resolution
Just to confirm what we've agreed...	close with a recap

Practice

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

1. First of all, I completely ___ your frustration — I'd feel the same.
2. Let me ___ this and get back to you before end of day.
3. By way of ___, we'd like to offer you a 20% credit on your next invoice.
4. Once we identify the ___ cause, we can prevent this from happening again.
5. If we can't resolve it at my level, I'll ___ to my manager.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

6. Just to ___ what we've agreed: reissue the invoice today and a 15% credit on the next one.

Collocations · complaint-handling language

Match each verb with the most natural completion.

Term	Meaning
handle	a complaint
acknowledge	the issue
investigate	the root cause
offer	a goodwill gesture
reach	a resolution
escalate	to a manager

Odd one out · register

One option is too defensive, too casual, or over-apologetic for a professional context.

1. 'I completely understand your frustration.' / 'Calm down, please.' / 'That's absolutely not the experience we want you to have.' / 'I can see why that's frustrating.'

- ☐ A. 'I completely understand your frustration.'
- ☐ B. 'Calm down, please.'
- ☐ C. 'That's absolutely not the experience we want you to have.'
- ☐ D. 'I can see why that's frustrating.'

2. 'Let me look into this.' / 'I'll investigate and revert.' / 'Not my problem, honestly.' / 'Give me an hour and I'll come back to you with an answer.'

- ☐ A. 'Let me look into this.'
- ☐ B. 'I'll investigate and revert.'
- ☐ C. 'Not my problem, honestly.'
- ☐ D. 'Give me an hour and I'll come back to you with an answer.'

3. 'I'm so, so, so sorry, this is terrible, please forgive us.' / 'I apologise for the inconvenience.' / 'That's clearly not acceptable, and I'll make it right.' / 'I'm sorry this happened — let's fix it now.'

- ☐ A. 'I'm so, so, so sorry, this is terrible, please forgive us.'
- ☐ B. 'I apologise for the inconvenience.'
- ☐ C. 'That's clearly not acceptable, and I'll make it right.'
- ☐ D. 'I'm sorry this happened — let's fix it now.'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Grammar · Past simple vs present perfect in complaint handling

14 min

1. Past simple — a specific, finished moment

The parcel arrived yesterday. · You called us last Tuesday. · We shipped the invoice on 12 May. Use with clear past markers: yesterday, last week, on Tuesday, ago.

2. Present perfect — connection with now

We have already refunded the payment. · I haven't received your email yet. · This is the third time this has happened. Use for actions relevant now, with markers like already, yet, just, since, for, this week/month, so far.

3. The typical complaint pattern

'The invoice arrived last week (past simple), but I still haven't been able to process it (present perfect).' — one finished action + one situation still open.

4. Emphasising recent action / responsibility

'I've just spoken to our warehouse.' · 'I've already raised a ticket on your behalf.' — the customer feels the action is happening now, even though it's technically finished.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise A — Past simple or present perfect?

Choose the correct form.

1. Your invoice ___ (arrive) last Thursday, but our accountant ___ (not manage / yet) to process it.
 2. I ___ (just / speak) to the warehouse — they ___ (dispatch) the replacement this morning.
 3. We ___ (be) a customer of yours since 2019, and this is the third time this ___ (happen).
 4. I'm sorry — I ___ (not receive / yet) the confirmation email you mentioned.
 5. Yesterday morning I ___ (send) the corrected invoice, and I ___ (just / check) that it landed in your inbox.
-

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise B — Rewrite in a professional register

Same meaning, more professional wording, and correct tense.

1. Yesterday I not receive your email.

2. I already sent the refund this morning.

3. We are having this problem three times this month.

4. Since last week I trying to reach your team.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise C — Fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE mistake. Rewrite it correctly.

1. I have called you yesterday.

2. We didn't received the invoice yet.

3. This has happened three times last month.

4. I have just to speak to the warehouse.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise D — Discursive writing (80-100 words)

Write a short paragraph using **AT LEAST 3 present-perfect verbs** and **2 past-simple verbs**.

1. Describe a real (or realistic) recurring complaint from your workplace: what happened, what you've already done about it, and what still hasn't been resolved.

Describe the picture



Look at the picture. Write 4-5 sentences describing what has probably happened before the call **AND** what the agent is doing right now to fix it. Use past simple and present perfect together.

Target language: ...last week / yesterday (past simple) · ...has already... / hasn't ... yet (present perfect)
· This is the third time this has happened. · I've just spoken to... · Just to confirm what we've agreed...

Listening · A recurring delivery complaint

10 min

Sofia (procurement) calls Tiago (account manager) about a supplier delivery that is late — for the third time this quarter. Notice how Tiago handles the recovery.

Gist

1. What is Sofia's core complaint?

2. How does Tiago structure his response?

Detail

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. What phrase does Tiago use to acknowledge the problem?

2. What TWO concrete actions does he commit to during the call?

3. What does he promise to send in writing after the call?

4. What condition does Sofia set for continuing the relationship?

Listen and complete

Fill in ONE or TWO words.

1. That's absolutely not the ___ we want you to have.

2. Let me ___ into this and get back to you within the hour.

3. By way of ___, we'd like to offer a 15% credit on the next invoice.

4. Just to ___ what we've agreed...

5. I've ___ raised the case with our logistics director.

Speaking · Acknowledge, investigate, propose, confirm

10 min

Work in pairs. Rotate roles across the tasks.

Writing · Written complaint response (100-120 words)

8 min (or homework)

Write the written follow-up email Tiago sends Sofia after the call. Include: a one-sentence acknowledgement, a summary of the actions already taken (present perfect) and last week's penalty (past simple), the goodwill gesture, the written action-plan commitment with a deadline, and an invitation to reply. Use at least ONE 'Just to confirm...' recap.

Workbook

When something goes wrong: handling complaints — Workbook

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. Vocabulary in context

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

1. First, I need to ___ that this isn't the experience you should have had.
 2. Let me ___ this and get back to you within the hour.
 3. By way of a ___, we'd like to offer you a 15% credit on your next invoice.
 4. Once we identify the ___, we can prevent this from happening again.
 5. If I can't resolve this at my level, I'll ___ to my manager.
 6. Within 48 hours you'll receive a written ___ with specific commitments.
-

2. Past simple vs present perfect

Write the correct form of the verb.

1. The invoice ___ (arrive) last Thursday, but we ___ (not manage / yet) to process it.
 2. I ___ (just / speak) to the warehouse — they ___ (dispatch) the replacement this morning.
 3. We ___ (be) a customer of yours since 2019, and this ___ (happen) three times in the last twelve weeks.
 4. Yesterday morning I ___ (send) the corrected invoice, and I ___ (just / check) that it landed.
 5. I'm sorry — I ___ (not receive / yet) your email.
 6. Last Friday your late delivery ___ (cost) us a contractual penalty.
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3. Which sentence is more appropriate for a complaint call?

Choose the more professional option.

1. You want to acknowledge the problem.
 - ☐ A. Calm down, please.
 - ☐ B. I completely understand your frustration.
 - ☐ C. OK, whatever.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

2. You want to buy time to investigate properly.

- ☐ **A.** Wait a lot.
- ☐ **B.** Let me look into this and get back to you within the hour.
- ☐ **C.** Not now.

3. You want to introduce a goodwill gesture.

- ☐ **A.** Take this money.
- ☐ **B.** By way of apology, we'd like to offer a 15% credit on your next invoice.
- ☐ **C.** We give you discount, ok?

4. You want to commit in writing.

- ☐ **A.** I write email later.
- ☐ **B.** I'll follow up in writing within 48 hours with a full action plan.
- ☐ **C.** You'll get something soon.

5. You want to close with a recap.

- ☐ **A.** Bye, thanks.
- ☐ **B.** Just to confirm what we've agreed — a 15% credit and a written plan within 48 hours.
- ☐ **C.** So, ok, bye.

4. Find and fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE mistake. Rewrite it correctly.

1. I have called you yesterday.

2. We didn't received the invoice yet.

3. This has happened three times last month.

4. I have just to speak to the warehouse.

5. We are a customer since 2019.

6. By way of apologise, we offer a credit.

5. Listening — a recurring delivery complaint

Sofia (procurement) calls Tiago (account manager) about a late delivery — for the third time this quarter. Listen (or read the transcript) and answer.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. How does Tiago acknowledge the complaint?

2. What TWO concrete actions does Tiago commit to during the call?

3. What does he promise to send in writing after the call, and by when?

4. What is Sofia's condition for continuing the relationship?

6. Writing — written complaint response (100-120 words)

Write the written follow-up email Tiago sends Sofia after the call. Include: a one-sentence acknowledgement, a summary of the actions already taken (present perfect) and last week's penalty (past simple), the goodwill gesture, the written action-plan commitment with a deadline, and an invitation to reply. Use at least ONE 'Just to confirm...' recap.

7. Reading & discursive reflection

Re-read the classbook article 'Why sorry isn't enough'. Then answer in 100-130 words.

1. The article claims that a well-handled complaint can build MORE loyalty than a smooth first experience — but that this stops being true from the second recurrence of the same problem. In your workplace, does the second complaint on the same topic reach the people who could actually fix the root cause? What would you change?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
