



**APEX ENGLISH**

Your voice. Global.

**B1 · BUSINESS ENGLISH**

**UNIT 8 · B1·8A**

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# When things go wrong

*Theme · Problems & solutions*

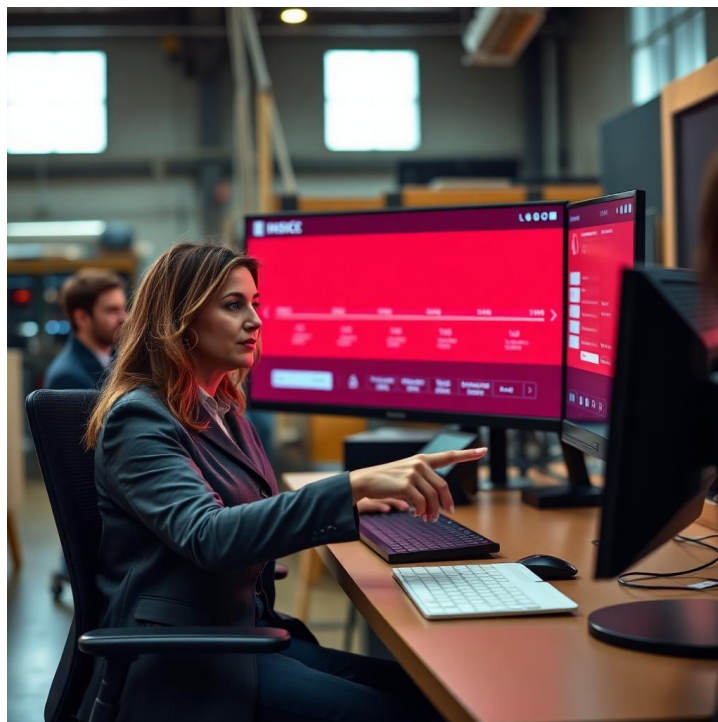


Unit 8 · B1·8A

# When things go wrong

Theme: Problems & solutions

B1 · Business English



## Learning objectives

- Describe a workplace incident using past continuous + past simple ('I was writing the report when the system crashed').
- Report a problem calmly, in the right order: what happened, what you did, what you need.
- Use six high-frequency 'problem' verbs and nouns you can drop into any status update.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



## Class Book

### Warm-up · The last small disaster at work

Think of the *LAST* small thing that went wrong at work — a missed deadline, a wrong file, a broken meeting link. Answer three questions in one sentence each.

What were you doing when it went wrong?

What did you do first?

Looking back, what would you do differently?

### Lead-in: what happened next?

Four workplace situations. For each one, choose the option that describes the *MOST* professional next move. There is one clearly better answer per case.

**kind:** scenarios

1. **title:** The wrong attachment · **setup:** You sent an internal salary spreadsheet to the whole company instead of just HR. You realise 3 minutes after sending.

2. **title:** The client demo crashes · **setup:** You're 4 minutes into a live client demo. The software freezes on your laptop. The client can see the frozen screen.

3. **title:** The delivery goes to the wrong address · **setup:** A €4,000 shipment arrived at a customer's OLD address today. They just called, calm but firm.

4. **title:** Silent bug for two weeks · **setup:** You discover an invoicing bug that has slightly overcharged 40 customers for the past 14 days. No one has complained yet.

**followUp:** Which of your answers was the closest call? Explain in one sentence.

### Reading · The three-sentence status update

The best status updates when something goes wrong are always three sentences long. Sentence one is what happened, in plain language, no jargon and no blame. Sentence two is what you have done in the last hour — a concrete action, not a plan. Sentence three is what you need from the reader — a decision, a resource, or nothing at all.

Most bad status updates fail at sentence one. They open with excuses — 'as you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday' — or with drama — 'this is a disaster'. Both waste the reader's attention. A calm, factual first sentence ('The payment gateway went down at 09:14 this morning') tells the reader you're in control before you've said what you did.

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Sentence two is where trust is built or lost. 'We're looking into it' loses trust. 'I've routed all payments to the backup provider and 78% of orders are going through' builds it. Numbers, verbs in the past, specific actions — those three things separate a professional update from a panicked one.

Sentence three is the one most people forget. If you don't ask for anything, the reader has to guess whether they need to act. Even 'no action needed from you — I'll send the next update at 14:00' is better than silence. Silence in a crisis feels a lot like abandonment.

1. How long should the ideal status update be?
  - (A) One paragraph
  - (B) Three sentences
  - (C) As long as the situation needs
2. According to the text, why is 'we're looking into it' a bad phrase?
  - (A) It's too formal
  - (B) It gives no concrete action, so it loses trust
  - (C) It's grammatically wrong
3. What is the most-forgotten sentence?
  - (A) The apology
  - (B) What you need from the reader
  - (C) The greeting

### Vocabulary in context

*Match the phrase to the meaning.*

**in plain language** — without jargon or drama

**a concrete action** — something you have actually done, not planned

**to route (traffic / payments) to** — to send them via a different path

**no action needed** — the reader does not have to do anything

### True / False / Not Given

*Based only on the text.*

1. A good status update should be about one paragraph long.
  - (A) True
  - (B) False
  - (C) Not Given
2. Opening with an excuse wastes the reader's attention.
  - (A) True
  - (B) False
  - (C) Not Given

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3. 'We're looking into it' is worse than a specific action with a number.  
(A) True  
(B) False  
(C) Not Given
4. Every status update should include an apology.  
(A) True  
(B) False  
(C) Not Given
5. Silence is the safest choice when you don't have a solution yet.  
(A) True  
(B) False  
(C) Not Given

### React to the text

*Discuss briefly.*

1. In your company, do people update calmly or dramatically when something goes wrong?

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2. Is 'no action needed from you' polite or lazy in your language?

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### Scan for meaning

*Find the phrase in the text that matches each definition.*

1. without jargon and without blame

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2. something you actually did, not something you plan

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3. an update that admits the reader doesn't have to do anything

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### Vocabulary · Six 'problem' verbs and nouns

**an issue / a bug** — a small technical or process friction point

**an incident** — the neutral word for something that went wrong (favoured in reports)

**a workaround** — a temporary fix that keeps things running

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**root cause** — the real underlying reason, not the symptom

**a delay** — when something is slower than expected

**an outage** — when a system is completely unavailable

**to escalate** — to hand a friction point to a more senior person

**to roll back** — to undo a recent change and return to the previous version

**to trigger** — to make something start (usually accidentally)

**to spot** — to notice early

**to flag** — to mark for attention

**to resolve** — to close a problem completely

### practice

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

1. We've applied a temporary \_\_\_\_ so orders keep going through while we fix the real bug.

2. The 09:14 \_\_\_\_ affected roughly 12% of transactions for 40 minutes.

3. I've \_\_\_\_ the ticket to my team lead — she can approve the refund.

4. We \_\_\_\_ the deployment at 09:15 and traffic recovered within 5 minutes.

5. The \_\_\_\_ of the issue was a badly configured cache, not the payment provider.

6. Please \_\_\_\_ any similar errors in the ticket so we can track them.

### Collocations · common problem phrases

*Match the verb with the noun.*

**identify** — the root cause

**apply** — a workaround

**report** — an incident

**cause** — an outage

**resolve** — an issue

**escalate** — a ticket

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**Odd one out**

*Choose the word that does NOT belong.*

1. issue · bug · outage · deadline

(A) issue

(B) bug

(C) outage

(D) deadline

2. roll back · escalate · workaround · celebrate

(A) roll back

(B) escalate

(C) workaround

(D) celebrate

3. spot · flag · resolve · postpone

(A) spot

(B) flag

(C) resolve

(D) postpone

**Word building · verb ↔ noun**

*Complete the pair.*

1. to resolve → a \_\_\_\_

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2. to delay → a \_\_\_\_

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3. to escalate → an \_\_\_\_

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4. to fail → a \_\_\_\_

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5. to recover → a \_\_\_\_

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## Grammar · Past continuous + past simple (interrupted action)

**1. Form: past continuous = was/were + verb-ing** — • I was writing the report at 9am. • The team was testing the new release when ...

**2. Interrupted action: past continuous (background) + past simple (interruption)** — • I was writing the report when the system crashed. • We were rolling out the update when we spotted the bug.

**3. Two parallel actions in the past: while + past continuous** — • While I was calling the vendor, my colleague was writing to the client. • While we were rolling back, the phones started ringing.

**4. State verbs (know, understand, own, need) — no continuous** — • I knew there was a problem. (NOT: I was knowing.) • We needed help. (NOT: We were needing help.)

**5. Time markers: at 09:14 / at that moment / when + past simple** — • At 09:14 we were still processing payments normally. • When the alert came in, three of us were already on the call.

### Exercise A — put the verbs in the correct tense

*Past continuous OR past simple.*

1. I (write) the report when the system (crash).

2. We (test) the new release when we (spot) the bug.

3. While I (call) the vendor, my colleague (write) to the client.

4. At 09:14 we (still / process) payments normally.

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5. When the alert (come) in, three of us (already / be) on the call.

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6. The team (roll out) the update when the site (go) down.

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### Exercise B — find and fix the mistake

*Each sentence has ONE mistake.*

1. I was knowing there was a problem.

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2. When the system crashed, I write the report.

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3. While we rolled back the update, the phones were start ringing.

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4. The team was need help immediately.

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### Exercise C — join the two events

*Combine each pair using past continuous + past simple.*

1. I / write the email — my manager / call me

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2. We / test the demo — the wifi / drop

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3. She / present to the client — the fire alarm / go off

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4. The team / deploy the fix — a second bug / appear

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### Exercise D — write your own incident line

*Write ONE sentence about a real (or plausible) work incident using past continuous + past simple.*

1. A wifi drop during a client call.

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2. A file lost right before a deadline.

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3. A colleague resigned in a difficult week.

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## Exercise E — the three-sentence status update

Write a three-sentence status update for each incident, using past continuous + past simple in sentence one.

1. The payment gateway went down at 09:14 for 40 minutes.

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2. You sent an internal spreadsheet to the whole company by mistake.

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## Listening · Three status updates, one outage

The same 40-minute payment-gateway outage. Three team leads brief the CEO on Slack voice-note. Decide which one you'd promote, which one you'd coach, and which one you'd worry about.

### pre

In your team, who is the calmest voice when things go wrong?

What's the ONE phrase you're tired of hearing during incidents?

### gist

1. Which voice sticks to the three-sentence rule?

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2. Which voice opens with excuses?

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3. Which voice sounds panicked?

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### detail

1. What specific action did Voice B take?

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2. What is missing from Voice A's update, tactically?

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3. Why does Voice C's tone make things worse?

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### Third listen — read between the lines

Answer from what is *IMPLIED*.

1. Which lead does the CEO trust most in a crisis?

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2. What should Voice C do BEFORE the next update?

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### Useful language from the audio

Match each phrase to what it does.

**"At 09:14, the gateway went down."** — opens with a factual timestamp

**"I've routed traffic to the backup — 82% of orders are going through."** — reports a concrete action with a number

**"No action needed from you — next update at 11:00."** — closes with a clear ask or a clear release

**"As you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday..."** — opens with an excuse

**"This is a disaster — we don't know what happened."** — signals lost control

**Voice A:** Hi team, so as you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday, we flagged this to procurement last month, and I want to say we did warn everyone. Anyway, payments went down this morning at some point, we're on it, more info when I have it.

**Voice B:** Quick update. At 09:14 the payment gateway went down while we were processing the morning batch. I've routed traffic to the backup provider and 82% of orders are going through. No action needed from you — I'll send the next update at 11:00 with the root cause.

**Voice C:** Hi, hi, so this is a disaster, we don't know what happened yet, everyone is on the call, the vendor isn't answering the phone, I'll come back to you as soon as I know something, but honestly I have no idea when that will be.

### Fourth listen — fill the gaps

Complete the exact phrases from the audio.

1. At 09:14 the payment gateway \_\_\_\_ down.

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2. I've \_\_\_\_ traffic to the backup provider.

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3. 82% of orders are going \_\_\_\_.

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4. No action needed from you — next update at \_\_\_\_.

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5. This is a \_\_\_\_ — we don't know what happened.

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## Speaking · Your 60-second incident debrief

Choose *ONE* real or realistic incident from your work life. Prepare a 60-second oral status update in three sentences: what happened (past continuous + past simple), what you did (past simple + numbers), what you need (or 'no action needed').

**Scene:** Incident 1 — the missed client email

A: You: an account manager. A client emailed at 08:03 with an urgent question. You saw it at 15:00.

B: You: the head of client success. React — accept, ask for the root cause, or ask what changes tomorrow.

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**Scene:** Incident 2 — the late delivery

A: You: an ops manager. A €4,000 shipment arrived at the customer's OLD address today.

B: You: the CEO. React — accept the plan, push for a bigger goodwill gesture, or ask for the process fix.

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**Scene:** Incident 3 — the wrong invoice

A: You: a finance lead. 40 customers were slightly overcharged for 14 days. Nobody noticed yet.

B: You: the head of legal. React — approve the proactive email, ask for a lawyer review first, or push back on the wording.

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## Class discussion

*Discuss briefly.*

In your industry, is 'own the incident' or 'defend the team' the default reflex?

What is the ONE phrase you would ban from status updates in your company?

Is 'no action needed from you' polite or lazy in your language?

## Role-play · deliver one bad-news update

*Student A gives the three-sentence status update. Student B (the boss) reacts with ONE clarifying question. A answers in ONE calm sentence.*

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**Scene:** The launch is 48 hours late.

A: Student A: the project lead. Deliver the three-sentence update.

B: Student B: the CEO. Ask ONE calm question — cause, blame, or plan.

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**Scene:** The server was down for 90 minutes on Black Friday.

A: Student A: the ops lead. Deliver the three-sentence update.

B: Student B: the CFO. Ask ONE calm question — revenue impact, cause, or communication to customers.

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## Workbook — home practice



### 1. Vocabulary gap-fill

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

**Word bank:** workaround · outage · escalated · rolled back · root cause · flag

1. We've applied a temporary \_\_\_\_ so orders keep going through.

2. The 09:14 \_\_\_\_ affected 12% of transactions for 40 minutes.

3. I've \_\_\_\_ the ticket to my team lead — she can approve the refund.

4. We \_\_\_\_ the deployment at 09:15 and traffic recovered.

5. The \_\_\_\_ was a badly configured cache, not the payment provider.

6. Please \_\_\_\_ any similar errors so we can track them.

### 2. Past continuous vs past simple

Put the verbs in the correct tense.

1. I (write) the report when the system (crash).

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2. We (test) the release when we (spot) the bug.

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3. While I (call) the vendor, my colleague (write) to the client.

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4. At 09:14 we (still / process) payments normally.

---

5. When the alert (come) in, three of us (already / be) on the call.

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6. The team (roll out) the update when the site (go) down.

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### 3. Which status update is stronger?

*Choose the version that builds MORE trust.*

1. Opening line:
  - (A) 'As you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday...'
  - (B) 'At 09:14 the payment gateway went down for 40 minutes.'
  - (C) 'This is a disaster — we don't know what happened.'
2. Sentence two:
  - (A) 'We're looking into it.'
  - (B) 'I've routed traffic to the backup — 82% of orders are going through.'
  - (C) 'The vendor isn't answering the phone.'
3. Sentence three:
  - (A) No sentence three — end there.
  - (B) 'No action needed from you — next update at 11:00.'
  - (C) 'I'll come back when I know something.'
4. Best language for the incident report:
  - (A) 'It's chaos.'
  - (B) 'Root cause: badly configured cache; workaround applied.'
  - (C) 'Everything broke.'

### 4. Find and fix the mistake

*Each sentence has ONE mistake.*

1. I was knowing there was a problem.
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2. When the system crashed, I write the report.

3. While we rolled back, the phones were start ringing.

4. The team was need help immediately.

## 5. Listening — three status updates, one outage

Three team leads brief the CEO on Slack voice-note about the same 40-minute outage. Who would you promote, coach, or worry about?

1. Which voice sticks to the three-sentence rule?

2. Which voice opens with excuses?

3. Which voice sounds panicked?

**Voice A:** Hi team, so as you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday, we flagged this to procurement last month... anyway, payments went down this morning at some point, we're on it, more info when I have it.

**Voice B:** Quick update. At 09:14 the payment gateway went down while we were processing the morning batch. I've routed traffic to the backup provider and 82% of orders are going through. No action needed from you — next update at 11:00.

**Voice C:** So this is a disaster, we don't know what happened yet, everyone is on the call, the vendor isn't answering, I'll come back to you as soon as I know something.

## 6. Writing — your three-sentence status update

Choose *ONE* real (or realistic) incident from your work life. Write the three-sentence update. Sentence 1: past continuous + past simple ('At 09:14, we were processing... when...'). Sentence 2: past simple with *ONE* concrete action and *ONE* number. Sentence 3: what you need or 'no action needed from you — next update at [time]'. Max 80 words.

## 7. Case study preview

Before Case Study 8, answer briefly.

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1. A food-delivery app gets 40 one-star reviews in 48 hours after a bug. Do you reply publicly to each one, or issue one public statement?

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2. What is the ONE 'used to' sentence a founder should be able to say honestly by month 6?

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## Answer key — Class Book

### Reading · The three-sentence status update

1. (B) Three sentences
2. (B) It gives no concrete action, so it loses trust
3. (B) What you need from the reader
1. (B) False
2. (A) True
3. (A) True
4. (C) Not Given
5. (B) False
1. Model: mostly dramatically. Every issue becomes a red-alert email. The result is that real red alerts get ignored.
2. Model: polite — it saves the reader's brain. Only lazy if you use it when action actually IS needed.
1. in plain language, no jargon and no blame
2. a concrete action
3. no action needed from you

### Vocabulary · Six 'problem' verbs and nouns

1. workaround
2. outage
3. escalated
4. rolled back
5. root cause
6. flag
1. (D) deadline
2. (D) celebrate
3. (D) postpone
1. resolution
2. delay
3. escalation
4. failure
5. recovery

### Grammar · Past continuous + past simple (interrupted action)

1. was writing / crashed
2. were testing / spotted
3. was calling / was writing
4. were still processing
5. came / were already
6. was rolling out / went
1. I knew there was a problem.
2. When the system crashed, I was writing the report.
3. While we were rolling back the update, the phones started ringing.
4. The team needed help immediately.
1. I was writing the email when my manager called me.
2. We were testing the demo when the wifi dropped.
3. She was presenting to the client when the fire alarm went off.
4. The team was deploying the fix when a second bug appeared.
1. Model: 'I was presenting the quarterly numbers to the client when the wifi dropped for eight minutes.'
2. Model: 'I was finishing the presentation at 11pm when Word crashed and lost the last hour of work.'
3. Model: 'We were preparing the launch when my project lead handed in her notice.'
1. Model: 'At 09:14 the payment gateway went down while we were processing the morning batch. I've routed traffic to the backup provider and 82% of orders are going through. No action needed from you — I'll update again at 11:00.'

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2. Model: 'I was replying to HR at 15:42 when I attached the wrong spreadsheet and sent it company-wide. I've sent a recall and personal apology to everyone in the last five minutes. Nothing needed from you — I'll debrief with HR tomorrow.'

### Listening · Three status updates, one outage

1. Voice B — 'the gateway went down at 09:14 for 40 minutes. I've routed to the backup. No action needed.' Clean and calm.
2. Voice A — 'as you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday' — 15 seconds gone before we know what happened.
3. Voice C — 'this is a disaster, we don't know what happened yet' — no numbers, no actions, no ask.
  1. Routed payments to the backup provider; 82% of orders were going through within 5 minutes; scheduled a debrief for 11:00.
  2. Sentence three — the ask. No 'no action needed' or 'I need X from you'. Reader is left guessing.
  3. 'Disaster' signals lost control. The CEO has to spend energy calming the reporter before dealing with the actual issue.
1. Voice B — because Voice B reports facts, actions and asks in that order. Trust follows structure.
2. Take three minutes offline, breathe, gather one number and one action — then update.
  1. went
  2. routed
  3. through
  4. 11:00
  5. disaster

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## Answer key — Workbook

### 1. Vocabulary gap-fill

1. workaround
2. outage
3. escalated
4. rolled back
5. root cause
6. flag

### 2. Past continuous vs past simple

1. was writing / crashed
2. were testing / spotted
3. was calling / was writing
4. were still processing
5. came / were already
6. was rolling out / went

### 3. Which status update is stronger?

1. (B) 'At 09:14 the payment gateway went down for 40 minutes.'
2. (B) 'I've routed traffic to the backup — 82% of orders are going through.'
3. (B) 'No action needed from you — next update at 11:00.'
4. (B) 'Root cause: badly configured cache; workaround applied.'

### 4. Find and fix the mistake

1. I knew there was a problem.
2. When the system crashed, I was writing the report.
3. While we were rolling back, the phones started ringing.
4. The team needed help immediately.

### 5. Listening — three status updates, one outage

1. Voice B — timestamp, concrete action, clear ask.
2. Voice A — 'as you know, the vendor has been having issues since Tuesday...'.  
3. Voice C — 'this is a disaster, we don't know what happened yet.'

### 7. Case study preview

1. Model: one public statement + private reply to each reviewer. Public statement owns the story; private replies rebuild the individual trust.
2. Model: 'We used to reply to every complaint 24 hours late. We don't anymore.'

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