

THE

Business English Training

Language Key

WHAT'S INSIDE!

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- 2** We use experienced business English trainers who have a understanding of the language learning needs of Hong Kong professionals.
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THE Language Key

Welcome Back!

to enhancing your business English and communication skills.....

Dear Readers

Have you ever received a letter or email where the sentences go on and on, one after the other in a stream, with only commas to separate them? These sentences often contain a number of points, some of which might be related. This makes them difficult to read and understand. Here's an example of an email we received from one of our readers:

"I am working as a manager in Hong Kong, the communication with our customers is in English, therefore I have to send email, letters, etc., you know, but the problem is I want to learn more how to write, I feel that I am very bad in writing, so I need your help in this, how can I develop myself, I learn from your magazine but I need more if possible, thanks in advance for your help, I look forward to hearing from you."

With one idea in each clear, concise sentence, the message might read like this:

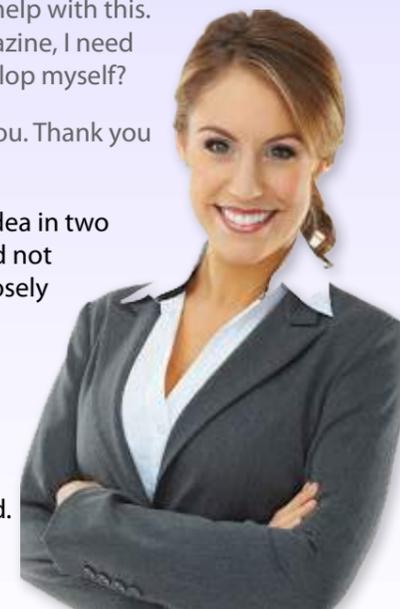
"I work as an manager in Hong Kong. The communication with our customers — email, letters, etc., — is in English. The problem is that I am very bad in writing. I want to learn how to write better, and I need your help with this. Although I learn from your magazine, I need more if possible. How can I develop myself?

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your help. "

We did include more than one idea in two sentences so the message would not sound choppy. But they were closely related ideas.

So, the message here is: include only one idea in each sentence. Sometimes, it's acceptable to include two ideas in a sentence but only if they are closely related.

Rebecca Williams
Editor – The Language Key



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Plan to Curb Mainland Tourist Arrivals

Hong Kong may lose as much as HK\$25 billion in retail sales if the government goes ahead with a proposal to reduce Chinese tourist arrivals by as much as 20%, according to Goldman Sachs Group Inc.

Public discontent over mainland visitors' purchases of homes, designer handbags and **daily necessities** led to street **protests** in Hong Kong earlier this year that demanded the government **limit** arrivals. **Curbs** on visitors in response may reduce the city's retail sales, about a third of which were to Chinese tourists in 2013.

Visitors from the mainland **accounted for** 75 per cent of Hong Kong's 54.3 million arrivals in 2013, according to the Tourism Commission. The government said earlier this year the city may have more than 70 million tourist arrivals in 2017.

A Hong Kong retail group **opposed** the proposed curb, saying it **violates** the city's **free market** policy and puts at risk more than 267,000 jobs in the retail industry. To give an example: mainland Chinese visitor spending accounts for almost 50 per cent of Harbour City and about 35 to 40 per cent of Time Square's sales.

Many **analysts** believe the proposed plans to curb the increasing number of Chinese visitors should help **ease** both the **burden** on **public infrastructure** and the growing **tensions** between the mainland Chinese and local residents.

Key Vocabulary

- public discontent** (phrase) unhappiness of the people living in a place
- daily necessities** (phrase) the things we need every day to live our lives
- protests** (noun) occasions when people show they disagree with something by marching in the street, holding signs, etc.
- limit** (verb) control something so that it is less than a particular amount or number
- curbs** (noun) things that limit or control something
- accounted for** (verb) was part of a total number of something
- opposed** (verb) disagreed with a plan or activity and tried to change or stop it
- violates** (verb) doesn't obey a law, rule, or agreement
- free market** (noun) a situation in which the government does not control prices and trade
- ease** (verb) make something become less severe or serious
- analysts** (noun) people whose job is to examine the details of a situation carefully and give an opinion about it
- burden** (noun) something difficult or unpleasant that you have to deal with or worry about
- public infrastructure** (phrase) examples include the road, rail and sea network, electricity grid, etc.
- tensions** (noun) feelings of fear or anger between two groups of people who do not trust each other



On Average Single Women Earn the Most in Hong Kong!

Single women in Hong Kong **earn** more than men which could explain the rising number of unmarried women.

A **survey** by the Census and Statistics Department showed that the **average** pay for single women was about 10 percent higher than that for men.

The study also showed that men and women who were more educated were less likely to get married.

According to the findings, among the various job types, the marriage **rate** among women from the service and sales **sectors** was the highest, while those in the **professional** and admin fields found it the most difficult to find a marriage partner.

June Ho, the Commissioner of the Department, **pointed**



out that **financial stability** was important to people in big cities. She added that one of the main reasons for failed marriages was the difference in a married couple's salaries.

'Friends and **relatives** like to ask where your husband is working. If he is less **capable** or earns less than you, you might feel **ashamed**,' she said.

However, Dr Ho Chi Kwan from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, said she did not think women were really concerned with the economic differences between the sexes. 'It is the men who cannot accept women who are more capable and earn more than them,' she said.

She pointed out that women had become more **committed** to their **careers** and therefore, didn't have as much time to socialise.

Key Vocabulary

- single** (adj.) not married
- earn** (verb) get money for doing work
- survey** (noun) an examination of people's opinions or behaviour made by asking people questions
- average** (adj.) adding some amounts together and then dividing by the number of amounts to get an amount
- sectors** (noun) parts of a country's economy
- professional** (adj.) relating to a job that

- needs special training or education
- pointed out** (phrasal verb) made a person notice someone or something
- financial stability** (phrase) the feeling that you are earning enough money
- capable** (adj.) able to do things effectively and achieve results
- ashamed** (adj.) feeling guilty or embarrassed about something you've done
- committed** (adj.) loyal and willing to give time and energy to something that you believe in



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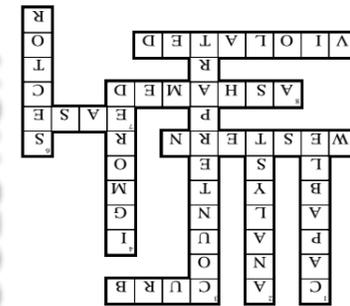
Complete the sentences below and right (including the crossword puzzle) using the highlighted vocabulary from the three articles. Remember to use the correct part of speech and verb tense in each case. You'll find the answers below.

1. If he makes a mistake I always think it's best to _____ immediately.
2. I've been _____ with Amy's duties until she returns from vacation.
3. How _____ do you feel Robert is to his job and the company?
4. _____ is her main priority in life, above love and friendship.
5. On _____, how much sales commission do you make in a month?
6. If you want to get cheap seats on this airline, you need to book well _____ of your departure date.
7. We'll have to _____ the number of guests attending the party.
8. My manager's direct and bullying nature often makes me feel _____.
9. There's growing _____ between Vietnam and China over some disputed islands in the South China Sea.
10. The online sales division's profits increased 72% last year in _____ with the retail stores division whose profits declined 3%.
11. The government has plans for over 200 _____ projects this year, including a new cross harbour tunnel.
12. Oil _____ for 40% of Norway's exports.

ANSWERS:

1. point it out
2. burdened
3. committed
4. financial stability
5. average
6. ahead
7. limit
8. uncomfortable
9. tensions
10. contrast
11. public infrastructure
12. accounts

SOLUTIONS

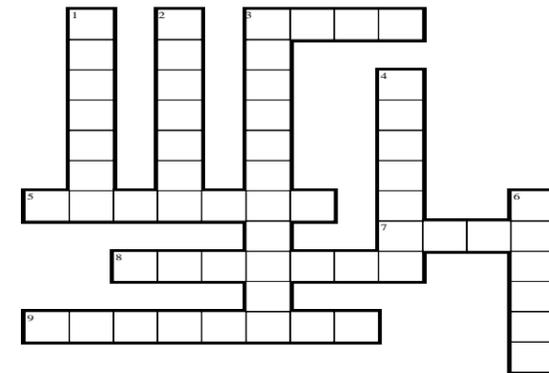


Across:

3. The government have implemented new measures to _____ inflation.
5. Although he is Chinese, his personality is very _____, having lived in the UK for many years.
7. The new highway should _____ traffic problems in the city
8. He was _____ to admit his mistake.
9. The planes appear to have deliberately _____ the cease-fire agreement.

Down:

1. She's a very _____ young woman.
2. Keith is a financial _____ for the Bank of Asia.
3. His Russian _____ refused to meet him.
4. They just _____ him and carried on with the game.
6. The country's retail _____ declined last year.



Cultural Concerns When Meeting Westerners

When meeting a **western** client, ensure you arrive **on time** for the appointment. If you arrive late to an appointment, it will **reflect** badly on you. If you know you will be arriving late, you should telephone **ahead** to let them know.

If a business meeting **takes place** over a meal, expect the business discussions to begin after everyone has ordered their meal, sometimes as soon as everyone is seated. **Socialising** usually occurs after the business is **concluded**, not before. This is **in contrast with** the practice in many Asian countries, where the purpose of the meal is to socialise with and get to know each other before any business is discussed.

Many western companies have women in management positions. So don't be surprised if the person who meets you is a woman, not a man. They are just as **competent** as their male **counterparts**. If you feel **uncomfortable**, focus on the business **at hand** and **ignore** the fact that she happens to be a woman. Do not, however, ask personal questions as you might with a male colleague. **In particular**, do not ask whether she is married or has children. Do not **flirt** with



her, refer to body parts, ask her out on a date, or make **suggestive** or sexual remarks.

When businessmen or businesswomen meet, they usually introduce themselves by shaking right hands. When you shake hands, don't hold their hand too tightly, but also don't hold their hand too lightly. A **firm** handshake is best.

Business cards are not normally exchanged upon meeting. If you need a colleague's contact information, it is alright to ask them for their business card. It is also alright to offer someone your business card. But there is not a special **ritual** of exchanging cards as in certain other cultures.

Key Vocabulary

- western** (adj.) relating to countries in the west part of the world, like North America and countries in the west of Europe
- on time** (phrase) a little early but not late
- reflect** (verb) be a sign of something
- ahead** (adv.) beforehand
- takes place** (phrasal verb) happens
- Socialising** (gerund) spending time enjoying yourself with other people
- concluded** (verb) finished
- in contrast with** (phrase) used to show that someone or something is completely different from someone or something else
- competent** (adj.) able to do something well
- counterparts** (noun) people who have the same purpose as another one in a different place or organization
- uncomfortable** (adj.) feeling or making you feel slightly embarrassed
- at hand** (phrase) near in time or position
- ignore** (verb) intentionally not listen or give attention to
- In particular** (phrase) especially
- flirt** (verb) behave as if sexually attracted to someone, although not seriously
- suggestive** (adj.) often used to describe something that makes people think about sex
- firm** (adjective) strong and quite tight
- ritual** (noun) a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony



Writing Replies to Letters of Complaint

Keeping customers happy is critical to the success of a business. Prompt replies to complaints can help retain customers who are dissatisfied with the service they received from your company. A well-written response letter follows a basic format and is an important tool in your company's complaint resolution process.

Model Letter Organisation and Structure:

A complaint is either justified or it is not. In this issue we will focus on the language and organisation of complaints which are justified. Try to organise your replies according to the model structure below:

1. Acknowledge Complaint
2. Explain Action Taken and Findings
3. Apologise / Give Assurances
4. Offer a Solution (if necessary or possible)
5. Polite Close / Perhaps Repeat Apology

1. Acknowledging the Complaint

- Start the letter with a normal introductory phrase:

I refer to your letter of regarding delivery times/the standard of the goods we supplied/our invoice (JK847)

- Avoid the YOU approach so as not to sound accusing:

✗ in which you complained

- Avoid using negative sounding words, e.g. damage, defective, mistake, and problem.

- Impress your reader with the sympathetic approach:

Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention.
Thank you for giving us the opportunity to look into this matter.
We appreciate your bringing this matter to our attention.

2. Explain Action Taken and Findings

- Be brief.
- Describe what you have done:

I have checked with the courier company and they inform me that
Having checked with our Personnel Department, it is clear that
According to our records
I have investigated the incident and clearly
After speaking to the teller involved,

- Describe what you have found out:

The delay was due to a computer error.
The damage to your shipment was caused mainly by clumsy handling.
Because of the dock strike, we missed the planned shipping date.
As a result of staff shortages in our accounts department, we sent out your cheque late.

3. Apologise / Give Assurances

- Accept responsibility, even if there is some doubt about this and apologise accordingly:

I really must apologise for the inconvenience which has been caused.
I hope you have not been too inconvenienced.
Please allow us to apologise for putting you to so much trouble.

- Give assurances but don't give promises which you may not be able to keep:

We assure you we will do all we can to avoid this error occurring again.

4. Offer a Solution (may not always be necessary or possible)

- Be very positive to show you are sincere.
- Perhaps offer some kind of compensation, e.g.

Here at Jebson Industries we feel strongly that your satisfaction is our top priority. So, in order to make up for some of the inconvenience you have been caused, we should like to offer a complete refund.

Naturally we take all our customers comments seriously. With this in mind, we are more than happy to cover the cost of replacing the damaged goods.

5. Polite Close / Repeat Apology

As with all business letters, a polite close is necessary.

You may want to enquire whether your offer is acceptable or simply to repeat your apology:

If you find our offer acceptable, please let me know as soon as possible. Please accept my apologies once again for the inconvenience.

I hope you that you have not been too inconvenienced by our mistake, and that you will continue to remain our customer.

MICROPLUS ELECTRONICS LTD
Unit 10, Kwai Fong Industrial Estate
New Territories
Hong Kong
Tel: 2988 1818 Fax: 2675 8478

4 September 20xx

Dear Mr Lee

Subject: Late Delivery of Order No. 39587

I refer to your letter of 16 July regarding the delay in delivery of your order for electronic components. Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

I have checked the matter with our distribution officer who informed me that we have been experiencing a number of problems with the new transport company. I am afraid that the delay in delivery was due to their unreliability.

I really must apologize for the inconvenience you have been caused. I assure you of a more reliable delivery service in the future.

Meanwhile, I can arrange for the overdue order to be delivered to your factory by messenger within two days.

If this arrangement is acceptable to you, please contact me as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Ross Cheong
Sales Supervisor

model letter

Business Writing Skills

Sequencing Ideas

When giving instructions, explaining a process or describing any sequence of events, it is very important to indicate clearly the time relationship between each of the events. If this is not clear to readers, they will need to guess what the sequence is. Most likely they will guess correctly but there will probably be some doubt in their minds. You will also have caused your readers to needlessly waste their time considering the sequence. So, for the sake of clarity and to avoid any possible confusion, always remember to clearly sequence any events you describe.

Here's an example of an email which includes a time sequence:

I am pleased to inform you of the arrangements for your group's visit to our factory on 17 June.

First of all, you will be shown round the factory by our Managing Director. **After that** you will have a chance to see the workshops. In particular, I would like you to spend some time with the trainees and as this was not in the original programme, the demonstration of the TX858 will take place a little later than planned. **Once** the demonstration has ended, there will be time for a few questions. **Finally**, we hope you will be able to meet our senior managers before you leave.

I do hope that you find these arrangements satisfactory.

Sequence Markers

Sequence markers are words or phrases which show the relationship between time. We put these words or phrases at or near the beginning of a sentence or clause. They connect the following information with the earlier information.

The table below shows the main sequence markers to signal time relationships:

Beginning

first	first of all	initially	to start with	the first step	at the first stage
second	secondly			the second step	at the second stage
third	thirdly			the third step	at the third stage
then	after that			the next step	at the next stage
next	subsequently			the final step	at the final stage
finally					

End

Consistency of Usage

Note that you should be consistent in your usage of these sequence markers. Try to use the same format throughout a sequence.

- ✗ first, secondly, third
- ✓ first, second, third
- ✗ the first step, the second stage, the next step
- ✓ the first step, the second step, the next step

Punctuation

Note that all of the above sequence markers are followed by a comma.

Other Sequencing Structures

Good business writers will vary the language and grammatical structures that they use.

When describing sequences, varying the language will help your writing to flow and make it sound more interesting.

On the right we list some of grammatical structures which can also be used to indicate time sequences.

before + verb....ing (gerund)

Before leaving the factory, I will give you a short explanation of what you will see.

after + verb....ing (gerund)

After visiting the factory, there will be time for questions.

(after) having + past participle

(After) having visited the factory we hope that you will have a much better idea of our plans.

once / before / after / when / as soon as + have + past participle

As soon as you have finished the report, could you then send it to Mr Bloomberg..



Sample Texts

The following texts show consistent usage of sequence markers and other sequencing structures:

First, you should check to see that you have all of the parts listed on the form. **After that**, you need to separate out parts marked with a 'Q' and those marked with an 'X'. **Then**, slot each of the parts into the main case so that the number and letter on each part corresponds to the number and letter above each of the slots in the main case. **Before switching** on the system, ensure that all the parts are firmly in their slots. **Once you have switched** the system on, you should be able to see a green light to indicate that the system is functioning correctly. **Finally**, press the button marked 'Start' to begin the operation.

First of all, the delegates will gather in the assembly hall for drinks and canapés. **Then**, at around 8 pm an announcement will be made for the delegates to proceed to the presentation room where Keith Green will introduce the evening's programme. **After that**, three key speakers will give their presentations. **As soon as third speaker**, Kevin Lunt, has finished his presentation there will be a short break of 15 minutes. **Finally**, we will wrap up the evening with a question and answer session between the delegates and the three key speakers.

Today I'm going to look at the results of our customer survey. **First**, I'll go through the survey questions, **then** I'll summarise the results, and **finally**, I'll outline the conclusions. **After that**, there'll be time for questions and discussion. So, let's start with the survey questions.



DIALOGUE



- Amy:** The Language Key Amy Ng speaking. May I help you?
Andy: Hello, I'm phoning about your business English courses. Could you please send me some information on them?
Amy: Certainly. Are you interested in our in-company or public courses?
Andy: I'm interested in your in-company training courses, particularly ones which focus on business writing skills.
Amy: Could I ask you how you found out about us? Did you see our advertisement in the newspaper?
Andy: No. Actually, I saw your advertisement in The Language Key magazine.
Amy: Are you a training officer?
Andy: Yes. I'm an Assistant Training Officer.
Amy: OK. We have a brochure giving full details of all our courses. It also includes a brief company profile and client list. Could I just take down your details?
Andy: Certainly. My name's Andy Wang.
Amy: Is that Wang with an 'a' or an 'i'?
Andy: With an 'a'.
Amy: And, may I have your company name and address?
Andy: Yes, it's Zirrex Ltd.
Amy: How do you spell Zirrex?
Andy: Z - I - double R - E - X.
Amy: Z - I - double R - E - S.
Andy: No. E - X as in Xerox.
Amy: OK ...that's E - X. And your address is?
Andy: 24th floor, The Guggenheim Building, 3 Gashouse St, Central.
Amy: Could you just repeat the building name for me?
Andy: The Guggenheim Building.
Amy: What is the spelling of 'Guggenheim'?
Andy: G - U - G - G - E - N - H - E - I - M.
Amy: So that's G - U - G - G - E - N - H - E - I - M.
Andy: Yes, that's correct.
Amy: Let me repeat your address ... 24th floor, The Guggenheim Building, 3 Gashouse St., Central.
Andy: That's right.
Amy: Your name is Andy Wang, and your title is Assistant Training Officer.
Andy: That's correct.
Amy: May I have your contact telephone number, please?
Andy: It's 2847 9584.
Amy: 2847 95
Andy: 2847 9584.
Amy: OK, I've got it ... 2847 9584.
Andy: Yes.
Amy: OK Mr Wang. We'll send the brochure to you in the next couple of days. Please do call us if you would like any further information.

Checking Back and Confirming Details

Talking on the telephone is a skill that you can develop by paying attention to the different things that you have to remember. Many times, you need to take down details like names, addresses and telephone numbers. You should always repeat these details back to the caller and confirm with the caller that you have noted them correctly. This is especially important if you are speaking to someone for the first time. You should take down their name and contact details very carefully and confirm the details with the caller before ending the call.

Situation

Andy Wang has been asked by his boss, the Training Manager, to collect some information on language consultants offering in-company training courses. Andy then phones The Language Key after seeing an advertisement in The Language Key magazine. Amy Nassar handles all phone enquiries for The Language Key. It's very important that she notes down the details of each enquiry very carefully. She has developed several techniques to ensure that she notes down the correct information.

Key Phrases



Answering the Phone

The Language Key. May I help you?
 Good morning, Tutors Live Ltd.. This is Amy Speaking.
 YTS Trading. This is Amy speaking. How may I help you?

Identifying Yourself

This is Mr Fujiyama speaking.
 It's Mr Fujiyama of NEG Osaka here.
 This is Mr Fujiyama.

Saying Why You're Calling

I'm phoning about an order we placed.
 I just wanted to ask if you have ...
 I'd like to speak to Kenneth Wong, please.
 Could you put me through to Kenneth Wong, please?

Asking for a Caller's Details

Could I have your name again, please?
 What did you say your name was?
 What's your number?
 What number are you on?
 What's your address?

Checking a Caller's Details

Is that Muzzy with a double 'Z'? (check spelling)
 Could you spell your name, please?
 How do you spell that, please?
 How do you spell the street/building name?
 Could you just repeat the building name for me?
 What is the spelling of 'Guggenheim'?

Confirming a Caller's Details

OK, I've got it ... 2847 9584. (repeat back)
 So that's G - U - G - G - E - N - H - E - I - M. (repeat back)
 OK ... that's E - X. (confirm spelling)
 Let me repeat your address ...

Concluding a Call

I'll post that out to you today.
 I'll give you a call as soon as I have this information.
 Thanks very much for calling.

Business Meetings

Whether you are holding the meeting or attending the meeting, it is polite to make small talk while you wait for the meeting to start. You should discuss things unrelated to the meeting, such as weather, family, or weekend plans. Here's a short sample dialogue:

- Patrick:** Hi Jack. How are you?
Jack: Great, thanks, and you?
Patrick: Well, I'm good now that the warm weather has finally arrived.
Jack: I know what you mean. I thought winter was never going to end.
Patrick: Have you dusted off your golf clubs yet?
Jack: Funny you should ask. I'm heading out with my brother-in-law for the first round of the year on Saturday.

Once everyone has arrived, the chairperson, or whoever is in charge of the meeting, should formally welcome everyone to the meeting and thank the attendees for coming.

- Well, since everyone is here, we should get started.
- Hello, everyone. Thank you for coming today.
- I think we'll begin now. First I'd like to welcome you all.
- We have a lot to cover today, so we really should begin.

Here's a sample welcome from the chairperson of a meeting:

I think we'll begin now. First I'd like to welcome you all and thank everyone for coming, especially at such short notice. I know you are all very busy and it's difficult to take time away from your daily tasks for meetings.

If you aren't a native speaker, you've probably come out of meetings feeling that you've missed some of the main points or decisions. Trying to follow a discussion in English about a complex topic isn't easy. If saying 'pardon' or 'sorry' are the only ways you know to ask someone to repeat something, you may feel embarrassed to use these expressions too often.

To avoid creating an awkward situation, it's a good idea to speakers to repeat something in a variety of ways. That way, the speaker may not even realize that they are having to repeat something more than once. And they may not notice that you're having problems understanding. You're more likely to appear interested in the details, instead of confused by the content.

In the dialogue below, focus on the six ways Tom uses to check his understanding.

- Jim:** Hi everyone, this is our new project manager, his name's Roy Trimb.
Tom: I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.
Roy: Roy, Roy Trimb. OK. Let's get down to business. I'm afraid money's a bit tight at the moment.
Tom: What do you mean by that?
Roy: I mean we don't have very much. The budget is very small for this project.
Sue: I suggest we channel some money into our project from R&D.
Tom: Are you saying we should cut the budget for R&D?
Sue: Yes, I am. We should cut it by 25%.
Jim: That money's tied up.
Tom: Tied up? (repetition of the word/phrase you don't understand)
Jim: Yes, we need it at R&D. We can't cut research now, or we'll fall behind our competitors.
Roy: We've been allocated insufficient time.
Tom: So, you feel we have been given enough time to finish the project. Is that right?
Roy: Well, no. I think we'll need even more time.
Tim: Why don't we put off the project?
Tom: Could you be a bit more specific?
Tim: This project isn't urgent. We could wait until the new year. In the meantime, we should draw up a new schedule and apply for a bigger budget.



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English Around the World



This month we spoke to Naoko Koyama who is a Japanese national working for an American bank in Tokyo. Naoko works as a supervisor in the current and savings account department and often has to deal with foreigners face to face. This is what she had to say about her use of English.

"Quite often, the tellers working in our branch have difficulty in understanding foreign customers and explaining our services and procedures. When this happens I am called upon to help. I don't really have problems explaining banking procedures and giving basic advice about banking matters.

My main problem is listening. Perhaps it is my lack of vocabulary or that the customer's accent is strange. Sometimes I need to ask customers to repeat what they are saying several times before I fully understand their meaning. This often causes embarrassment and frustration to the customer. And, it makes me feel incompetent.

I guess the best way to improve my listening is to find English-speaking friends so I can get used to the way it's spoken in real life at real speed.

I don't find classes very useful and they never prepare you properly for the day that you come face to face with a foreigner. I'll have to keep trying! The only way to improve and to gain in confidence is to speak and that is what I am trying to do."

A business owner decides to take a tour around his business and see how things are going. He goes down to the shipping docks and sees a young man leaning against the wall doing nothing.

The owner walks up to the young man and says, "Son, how much do you earn a day?"



The young man replies, "\$150."

The owner pulls out his wallet, gives him \$150, and tells him to get out and never come back.

A few minutes later, the clerk asks the owner, "Have you seen that DHL driver? I asked him to wait here for me!"

The secretary came in late for work the third day in a row. The boss called her into his office and said, "Now look Jill, I know we had a wild fling for a while, but that's over. I expect you to behave like any other employee around here. Who said you could come and go as you please around here?" Jill just smiled, lit up a cigarette, and while exhaling said, "My lawyer."

Teacher: Nick, what is the past participle of the verb to ring?

Nick: What do you think it is, sir?

Teacher: I don't think, I KNOW!

Nick: I don't think I know either, sir!

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Questions answers and tips with Dr English

If you have any questions that you would like to have answered by Dr English then email us: editor@languagekey.com

Q Could you tell me which prepositions we should use before addresses, telephone numbers and extensions?

A This is a commonly-asked question and a source of many errors. For addresses, including email addresses, you should use the preposition **at**. For example: **You can write to me at the following address and You can email your comments to me at this address: editor@languagekey.com.** For telephone numbers and extensions, the preposition **on** is used in British English: **Would you like me to call Ms Lo on her extension?** and **You can reach me on 2938 9384.** In American English, however, the preposition **at** is used with both extension and telephone numbers.

Q Could you tell me if the noun **staff** is singular or plural? Do we say **the staff is....** or **the staff are....**?

A **Staff**, a collective noun like **committee** and **team**, denotes a group of people. Whether it takes a singular or plural verb depends on if **staff** refers to the group as a unit or its members as individuals. For example: **The staff is meeting to review safety procedures.** (staff considered as a unit) And: **The staff are specialists, recruited from all over the world.** (staff considered as individuals)

Q Why should writers proofread their documents when they can use computer spelling and grammar checkers?

A Spelling and grammar checkers alert writers to many errors, but some errors still slip through. For example, a typographical error may produce a new word that is grammatically correct in its

context, but that changes a sentence's meaning. For example, in the sentences that follow, can you spot the error that slipped by the computer spelling and grammar checker?

The bank has changed its operating hours to better serve the community. It will not be open from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 6:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m., Saturday.

Did you spot the **not** that should be **now**? In these same sentences, the writer should also double-check the numbers to make sure that the times are accurate. Transposed numbers are a common error that slips through spelling and grammar checkers.

Q When talking about the workplace, which prepositions are used with the verb **work**? For example: **Do you work for/to Mr Ng?**

A **Work with** is used with a colleague's name: **I work with Jo Lau.** **Work under** is used with a boss's name: **I work under May Lam.** **Work for** is used with a company: **I work for HSBC.** **Work in** is used to generalise about the place you work: **I work in a Bank.** **Work at** is used to talk about the specific, well-known establishment where you work: **I work at Hong Kong University.**

Q My trainer told me that the phrases **in connection with**, **in respect of**, and **in regard to** are all out-of-date. Is this correct?

A Yes. All these phrases are rather old fashioned and unnecessarily lengthy. Replace them with either **about**, **regarding** or **concerning**. For example: **I am writing to you about your claim for damages.**

Agreeing to and Declining Requests

Tips

When agreeing to a request, agree to it in a positive manner. Don't just say 'Ok' or 'All right.' Use these positive phrases:

- Absolutely.
- Sure.
- Yes, I'd be happy to.
- No problem.
- That should be OK.

Sometimes, you may be undecided and unable to give a definite answer at that moment. In such cases, use these phrases to buy yourself a little time:

- Can I think about that?
- I'll get back to you. Let me have a think.
- If you don't mind, can I give you an answer this afternoon?
- Give me some time to consider it. I'll get back to you.

At other times, you may agree to a request but with certain conditions. Then you can use these phrases:

OK. But only with the following conditions:
Yes, that's fine. But only if...
Sure, but I'd prefer it if you...



Declining a request is more difficult. Don't decline a request directly. Use one of tentative phrases below and follow it up with a good reason:

- I'm afraid I can't.
- That's really not possible, I'm afraid.
- I wish I could but...
- I'd really love to help you, but...
- I'm not sure if that's a good idea.
- I don't know about that. You see...

Here are some phrases to politely decline an offer, such as a project you don't want to accept:

- I appreciate the offer, but...
- That would be great, but I'm already working on...
- Thank you for the offer, but my schedule is full at the moment.



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