

Lesson Plan: Formal complaints and negotiation in English

Level	Advanced (C1–C2)
Time	60–90 minutes
Skills	Writing, speaking
Focus	Complaint letter structure; escalation language; negotiation strategies; assertive diplomacy

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Write a formal complaint letter that is assertive but professional
- Use escalation language to signal increasing urgency appropriately
- Apply negotiation strategies in professional English
- Balance firmness and diplomacy in both spoken and written English

TARGET LANGUAGE & EXAMPLES

Formal complaint letter structure

- Para 1: State the problem clearly — date, reference, specific facts
- Para 2: Explain the impact and your dissatisfaction
- Para 3: State what you want: refund, replacement, apology, specific action
- Para 4: Deadline and consequence: 'If I do not hear from you within 14 days, I will...'

Escalation language — four levels

- Level 1 (concerned): I wish to bring to your attention...
- Level 2 (dissatisfied): I am disappointed that despite my earlier communication...
- Level 3 (firm): I must insist that this matter be resolved immediately.
- Level 4 (serious): I am left with no alternative but to seek legal advice.

Negotiation strategies

- Conditional offers: We would be willing to X, provided that Y.
- Anchoring: Start with a higher ask, expect to settle in the middle.
- Finding common ground: I think we both want to resolve this efficiently...
- BATNA awareness: know your walk-away point before you start.

Meaning & Nuance

Situation	Too aggressive	Too passive	Just right
Damaged goods	Your incompetence ruined everything.	I was a bit disappointed.	I am writing to express serious concern about the condition of goods received.
Delayed project	You've wasted our time.	Maybe you could try harder?	I must insist that the revised timeline be honoured.
Negotiating price	Take it or leave it.	Whatever you think is fair.	We had a figure of £X in mind — is there any flexibility?

Threatening action	We'll sue you immediately.	I'm not sure what to do next.	Should this remain unresolved, I will have no option but to seek legal advice.
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LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up: How would you handle this? (10 min)

Task: Three complaint scenarios. Students discuss how they'd respond.

→ *Surfaces existing strategies and language before teaching more sophisticated approaches.*

2. Presentation (15 min)

Task: Complaint structure. Escalation ladder — four distinct levels.

- Principle: formal complaints are effective when specific, factual, and firm — not emotional.
- Negotiation: conditional offer structure — 'We would be prepared to X if you could Y.'

3. Writing: Complaint letter (25 min)

Task: Students write a formal letter of complaint from a given scenario.

- Scenario: supplier delivered 300 items; 80 were damaged. Need refund and re-delivery within 10 days.
- Peer review using the complaint structure checklist.

4. Negotiation roleplay (25 min)

Task: Students negotiate a resolution — one plays the aggrieved customer, one the company rep.

- Goal: reach a written agreement within 15 minutes.
- Debrief: was the language assertive but professional?

TEACHER NOTES

- Business professionals consistently rate complaints and negotiation among the most useful English skills.
- The 'too aggressive / too passive / just right' table is highly effective for building pragmatic awareness.

EXTENSION / HOMEWORK

Choose one or more:

1. Write a formal complaint letter about a real or imaginary situation.
2. Write a negotiation dialogue (12 lines) where both parties reach a conditional agreement.
3. Research '5 negotiation strategies in English' and write a brief summary.