

Lesson 39 – Complaining & Criticizing

When we want to make a complaint or criticism in English, we often use specific words or phrases to make it politer and less direct. This helps the other person to listen and understand the complaint/criticism without getting defensive.

Erin had a bad experience at her bank, and now she's complaining to a manager. Listen to two very different ways to make complaints:

Conversation #1a - Complaining Rudely

Erin: This bank sucks!

Manager: I'm sorry you feel that way. Could you be a little more specific about the problem?

Erin: I'm sick and tired of waiting days for the problems with my account to be fixed. It's ridiculous.

Manager: I do apologize for the inconvenience. Please keep in mind that sometimes it's necessary to -

Erin: And your customer service by phone stinks, too. I will not put up with having to wait more than 20 minutes only to talk with an incompetent employee who can't do anything to help me.

Manager: I'm sorry you've had a bad experience. I will look into these issues immediately.

Erin: Oh and one more thing - the fees you charge are completely unfair. I have to pay a \$5 fee *every* time I take money out of another bank's ATM? That's outrageous!

Manager: Ma'am, please calm down. There's no need to raise your voice.

Conversation #1b - Complaining Politely

Erin: I'd like to make a complaint. I'm very disappointed with the customer service I've received at this bank.

Manager: Oh no, I'm sorry to hear that. Could you tell me what happened?

Erin: Every time I have a problem with my account, it takes several days to resolve it - and that's unacceptable, because I do need access to my money on a daily basis.

Manager: I apologize for the delays, ma'am. I promise you that we will take steps to improve in this area.

Erin: Also, I'm sorry to say this, but your customer service by phone leaves a lot to be desired. Not only do I have to wait a long time to talk to someone, but the representatives are generally not very helpful.

Manager: I can understand why you're frustrated – I will look into it.

Erin: I'm also not happy about the fees that are charged for using another bank's ATM. I was expecting something like \$1, but it's actually \$5, and I find that rather high.

Manager: I'm afraid there's not much we can do about the fees - they're an industry standard. But I assure you that I will do everything in my power to fix the other problems you've mentioned.

Conversation Vocabulary & Phrases

Notice the difference between the first conversation and the second conversation? In the first one, Erin used strong words like “outrageous” and “ridiculous,” as well as very negative expressions like “stinks,” “sucks,” “incompetent” and “I’m sick and tired...”

In the second one, Erin expressed her complaints in a more diplomatic way. Here are some good phrases for complaining in English. They often include the words “sorry,” “excuse me,” or “I’m afraid” to make them more polite:

- **“I’m sorry, but I have a few complaints about...”**
I’m sorry, but I have a few complaints about the cleanliness of this fitness center.
- **“I’m sorry to say that...” / “I hate to say this, but...”**
I’m sorry to say that the food at this restaurant is not very good.
- **“I’m sorry to bother you, but...”**
I’m sorry to bother you, but could you turn down the music?

- **“Excuse me, there is a problem with...”**
Excuse me, there is a problem with my bill. I was charged an extra \$50.
- **“There seems to be a problem with...”**
There seems to be a problem with my password. I can't log in.
- **“I was expecting _____, but...”**
I was expecting this hair dryer to last for several years, but it broke after a week.
- **“I'm afraid this is unacceptable.”**
- **“I'm not satisfied with...”**
I'm not satisfied with this hotel room – it is not what was advertised on your website.
- **“I'm rather upset about...”**
I'm rather upset about my subscription being canceled without warning.
- **“I'm very disappointed with...”**
I'm very disappointed with the lack of organization in this program.

The manager of the bank uses a variety of phrases to respond to Erin's complaints. If you work in customer service - or if you hear some complaints from a boss or coworker - you can reply with these phrases:

- **“I'm sorry to hear that.”**
- **“I'm so sorry; this will never happen again.”**
- **“I can assure you that we'll do everything we can to resolve the problem.”**
- **“I apologize for the delay/inconvenience/bad experience.”**

Conversation #2 – Criticism

When you need to criticize someone – say something negative about their work or behavior – it can be difficult to know what to say. Try to avoid direct statements like these:

- **“You're so lazy!”**
- **“You never arrive on time.”**
- **“You talk too much.”**
- **“This design is terrible.”**

Instead, one good technique is to use the "sandwich technique" – say one good thing, then give the criticism in a polite way, then finish by saying another good thing.

Start with a positive comment, like these:

- **"Thanks for..."**
- **"I appreciate..."**
- **"I can see that you put a lot of effort into this."**

Then give your criticism:

- **"Unfortunately..."**
- **"The problem is that..."**
- **"It's a bit / It's rather... (negative adjective)"**
It's a bit dirty. / It's rather disorganized.
- **"I'm afraid..."**

You can also include a suggestion or reason for the criticism:

- **"Next time, you might want to..."**
- **"It's really necessary/important to..."**

...and then finish with another positive phrase.

Let's take a look at some mini-conversations to see this technique in action:

Mini-Conversation #2a

Nancy: Sam, what did you think of the new website I designed for our organization?

Sam: Well, I can see that you put a lot of effort into it! I appreciate the fact that it's simple and easy to navigate. The only problem is that we really need a site that's a little more complex, with some advanced features like scheduling appointments and receiving donations.

Nancy: Oh... I'm not sure I know how to do that.

Sam: That's OK – we can use some of your great ideas to give guidelines to a professional designer.

Mini-Conversation #2b

Beth: Hi Andy – could I talk to you for a minute?

Andy: Sure.

Beth: Thanks for writing the article for our company newsletter – I appreciate all the work you did; it was very well-researched.

Andy: I'm glad you liked it!

Beth: The content was great – but unfortunately, I found a few grammatical errors in the text. It's really important to revise these articles carefully before they're published; otherwise, it makes the newsletter look a bit unprofessional.

Andy: Ah... I'm sorry about that. I'll be more careful in the future.

Beth: Next time, feel free to send it to me and I'm happy to check it over. You really are a good writer, so I'd love to help you out!

Notice how each conversation begins with a compliment, then gives the criticism, then ends on a positive note.

You've finished Lesson 39! Now take the quiz to help you remember the polite phrases for complaining and criticizing.

Quiz – Lesson 39

- 1) There _____ to be a problem with my credit card.
- A. looks
 - B. seems
 - C. sounds
- 2) Thanks for designing the poster. It's a good start, but it's a _____ plain. Could you add some more color?
- A. bit
 - B. lot
 - C. slight
- 3) Next time, you _____ want to check with your colleagues before rescheduling an important meeting - it'll help avoid misunderstandings.
- A. could
 - B. maybe
 - C. might
- 4) I'm very _____ with the treatment I've received.
- A. desperate
 - B. disappointed
 - C. disturbed
- 5) I'm sorry to _____ that the shipment was delivered several weeks late.
- A. say
 - B. speak
 - C. tell
- 6) I'm afraid this is _____.
- A. unacceptable
 - B. unbearable

C. undesirable

7) I was _____ to be informed of any changes, but I haven't received any information.

- A. expecting
- B. requiring
- C. wishing

8) I can see that you put a lot of _____ into this.

- A. effort
- B. power
- C. attempt

9) I can _____ you that we will look into this matter immediately.

- A. apologize
- B. assure
- C. confirm

10) I appreciate all the work you put into preparing this proposal, but I'm _____ it's not what we're looking for at this time.

- A. afraid
- B. scared
- C. sorry

Lesson 39 Quiz – Answers

1.B 2.A 3.C 4.B 5.A 6.A 7.A 8.A 9.B 10.A