

Describing Trends in Business – Video

In this lesson, you can learn how to describe trends and statistics in business English, with a focus on business English use. That means you'll learn how to describe sales figures, market trends, and company successes or failures.

You'll see useful language to talk about statistics in different ways, including how to describe line graphs, proportions and pie charts, and comparing different trends in business English.

1. Describing Trends

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Computer-graphs-scaled.webp>)

“Sales to the 18 to 35 age group increased consistently over the year. Sales rose from just under two million in the first quarter to a little over two million by the end of Q4.

Sales were strongest overall to the 36 to 50 demographic, with figures improving by five million between Q1 and Q3. However, the most spectacular results were seen in Q4; sales doubled from Q3, reaching a peak of 15 million.

For the 51 to 65 group, results were solid but there was only a negligible increase for the full year. Sales initially fell between Q1 and Q2, but recovered from four million in Q2 to 6.5 million by the end of Q4.

Finally, sales to those aged 66 and up decreased steadily throughout the year. Sales fell from eight million in the first quarter to two million by the end of Q4. There was a particularly pronounced decline between Q2 and Q3, when sales dropped by three million.”

Look at a sentence.

Sales _____ from 150 million to 200 million.

What word could you use to complete the sentence? There's more than one possible answer! Pause the video and think about it. Try to get as many answers as you can.

You could say:

Sales increased from 150 million to 200 million.

Sales rose from 150 million to 200 million.

You could also say ‘grew’, ‘improved’, or ‘climbed’. Note that you can only use ‘improve’ if you’re talking about something positive.

All these verbs follow the same pattern.

X (increased) from _____ to _____.

However, you can use them in other ways. Look at two sentences.

Sales increased to 1,000 in 2020.

Sales increased by 1,000 in 2020.

Do you know the difference? Could you explain it?

Let's do this by example.

2019 sales: 500

2020 sales: 1,000

If these are the figures, which is correct? Did sales increase **to** 1,000, or **by** 1,000?

The correct answer is: 'Sales increased **to** 1,000'. What about 'increased **by**'? What would the numbers look like?

If sales increased **by** 1,000, the numbers might look like this.

2019 sales: 500

2020 sales: 1,500

The same rule works with the other verbs you saw before: 'rise', 'grow', 'improve' and 'climb'.

Look at one more sentence:

Sales _____ from 15,000 to 13,000.

How many words could you use to complete this sentence?

You could say 'decrease', but again there are other possibilities; 'fall' and 'drop' are also common. You could also use 'decline', although it's rarer as a verb.

You can use the same patterns you saw before. For example, you can say that something decreased from something to something. Or, you can use 'by' after these verbs.

Finally, many of these verbs can also be used as nouns. For example:

There was a large increase in sales figures in the first quarter of the year.

There was a steady fall in advertising revenues throughout 2019.

We experienced a sudden drop in web traffic in August.

In some cases, the noun form is different, as in 'grow - growth', or 'improve - improvement'.

You can use these nouns in the way you just saw. For example:

There was a steady growth in advertising revenues throughout 2019.

Learn more about the parts of speech, including nouns and verbs. Watch this Oxford Online English lesson: Parts of Speech in English. (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/parts-of-speech>)

Now, you should have many different ways to describe trends (<https://speakspeak.com/english-grammar-exercises/business-vocabulary/describing-trends-rise-raise-lower-fall-grow>) in business English. Let's see how you can describe percentages and proportions.

2. Describing Percentages and Proportions

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Proportions-and-percentages-image.webp>)

"More than half (55%) of our sales were vehicle insurance. The second highest performer was home insurance, making up one-fifth of policies sold. Life and health insurance each comprised ten per cent of total sales, while travel insurance accounted for the smallest percentage of sales, at just five per cent."

If you want to talk about percentages and proportions, you'll need to use different language compared to talking about trends and quantities.

Look at some sentences you heard in the presentation.

1. More than _____ (55%) of our sales were vehicle insurance.

2. The second highest _____ was home insurance.
3. Life insurance and health insurance each _____ ten per cent of total sales.
4. Travel insurance _____ for the smallest percentage of sales, at just five per cent.

Can you remember the missing words? Pause the video and try to find the answers. If you want, you can also go back and review the presentation.

Ready? Let's check.

1. More than half (55%) of our sales were vehicle insurance.
2. The second highest _____ was home insurance.
3. Life insurance and health insurance each comprised ten per cent of total sales.
4. Travel insurance accounted for the smallest percentage of sales, at five per cent.

To talk about proportions, you might need to talk about fractions, like in sentence one.

Do you know other words for fractions in English (<https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/numbers-fractions.htm>)?

You can say 'a third', 'a quarter', 'a fifth', and so on. Then, you can add words like 'more than' or 'less than' to describe things more accurately.

For example:

Less than a third of customers said they would recommend us to a friend.

More than three quarters of purchases were through our website.

You might also need verbs like 'comprise' or 'account for', as you saw in sentences two and three. There was one more verb like this you heard in the presentation. Do you remember?

A similar verb is 'make up'. You heard:

The second highest performer was home insurance, making up one-fifth of policies sold.

You can use these verbs with percentages or fractions. For example, you can say:

Clothing sales accounted for 80% of our revenue last year.

Clothing sales accounted for four-fifths of our revenue last year.

Again, you can add a modifier (<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/modifiers/>), like 'more than' or 'approximately', if you need to. For example:

Clothing sales accounted for approximately four-fifths of our revenue last year.

Clothing sales accounted for just under four-fifths of our revenue last year.

In this way, you can describe a wide range of figures as precisely as you need to.

Let's move on to our next point when describing trends in business: describing rates of change.

3. How to Describe Rates of Change

"In Europe, the number of new customers fluctuated between 2017 and 2020, but overall numbers remained constant, with figures for 2020 very close to those for the beginning of the period.

In Asia, numbers increased in every year, but between 2019 and 2020 there was a dramatic rise, reaching a peak of 30 million new customers gained in 2020.

Customer acquisition in the Americas saw steady growth, with numbers rising by around five million each year.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the number of new customers collapsed between 2017 and 2018, reaching a low point of just half a million in 2018. Customer acquisition figures then levelled off, with only small fluctuations over the remaining period."

Let's look at some language you saw in the presentation.

1. In Europe, the number of new customers fluctuated between 2017 and 2020.
2. Between 2019 and 2020 there was a dramatic rise.
3. Customer acquisition in the Americas saw steady growth.
4. In the Middle East and North Africa, the number of new customers collapsed between 2017 and 2018.

Look at the highlighted words. Imagine that you want to explain what they mean to a colleague who hasn't seen them before. How would you explain the words in English? Think about it!

If a figure fluctuates, it moves up and down, but the overall change is small. Here, it means that the number increased and decreased in different years, but that the number in 2020 was close to the number for 2017.

A dramatic rise means a really large, sudden increase. 'Dramatic' is a strong word, so don't overuse it – save it for exceptional cases. If you want other words to describe a large increase, you could say 'a significant rise', 'a considerable rise' or 'a large rise'.

Remember that 'increase' can also be used as a noun, so you can say 'a dramatic rise' or 'a dramatic increase'. You can say 'a significant rise' or 'a significant increase', and so on.

'Steady growth' means that something increases at a constant rate over a period of time. You can also say 'gradual growth' or 'continuous growth', with a similar meaning.

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Steady-growth-graph-scaled.webp>)

Finally, in sentence four, 'collapse' means to decrease by a large amount in a short time. 'Collapse' has the meaning of something negative or destructive. Generally, if something collapses, then it doesn't exist any more.

'Collapse' can be a verb or a noun. You can use it as a noun like this: 'After the collapse of the company, thousands were made redundant.'

Do you like learning these new business English vocabulary words? We have another lesson we think you'll like: Business English Phrasal Verbs. (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/phrasal-verbs-for-business>)

Now, let's look at our final point to help you describe trends in business English.

4. Talking About Strong/Weak Sales Periods

"2020 was a strong year for our vehicle insurance arm. In fact, in the second half of the year, sales hit their highest levels ever, which made a significant contribution to our record profits for the year. The home insurance division also did well, with a solid performance throughout 2020. Although life insurance

constituted a small proportion of our total, sales nonetheless outperformed expectations, and we're hoping to build on that growth in 2021.

On the other hand, our health insurance division had a disappointing year, with sales falling well below expectations. Challenging market conditions led to a significant increase in customer acquisition costs, meaning that profitability was also negatively impacted. Sales of travel insurance were also poor, although broadly in line with predictions."

Look at some sentences from the presentation relating to a strong sales performance.

1. 2020 was a _____ year for our vehicle insurance arm.
2. Sales _____ their highest levels ever.
3. Life insurance sales _____ expectations.

Can you remember or guess the missing words? Pause the video and try to find your answers.

Let's take a look.

1. 2020 was a _____ year for our vehicle insurance arm.
2. Sales _____ their highest levels ever.
3. Life insurance sales _____ expectations.

Sales figures can be strong if they're better than expected. You can also use general words like 'good' or 'excellent'.

In sentence two, you can also say 'reached'. If sales hit their highest levels ever, then you could say that you set a new record.

You set a new record when you reach a level which is better than you ever have in the past.

In sentence three, 'outperform' means to perform better than expected. The opposite verb is 'underperform', so if figures are worse than expected, you could say that a department or a company underperformed.

What about if sales were poor? Look at three more sentences.

1. Our health insurance division had a _____ year.
2. _____ market conditions led to a significant increase in customer acquisition costs.
3. Sales of travel insurance were also _____.

Can you remember the missing words? You know what to do! Pause the video and get your answers now.

Could you remember? Let's look together.

If sales are worse than you expected, you could also describe them as 'weak', 'poor', or just 'bad'.

In sentence two, 'challenging' means something like 'difficult'. 'Challenging market conditions' means that doing business and making sales is harder than it normally is.

Don't forget: the presentations contain many more examples of language you can use to describe market trends and company performance. Review them several times and find words and phrases which you can use in your work!

Keep practicing with our other business English lessons (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/free-business-english-lessons>).