



Writing Skills

Reader Presupposition

Complaint Letters

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Reader Presupposition: Complaint Letters

This activity is unlike any I've found available for perspective taking and is one of my very favorites! It addresses the intricacies of writing while keeping your reader in mind, and the all-important skill of modifying your wording to give another person a targeted impression of you, all while working on a practical high-level life skill. It also combines writing skills and social skills. It begins with an actual complaint letter email requesting monetary compensation, extensive therapy notes on how to conduct the activity (including sentence by sentence interpretation of the effectiveness of the sample complaint letter's wording), and novel situations from which students must write their own complaint letters. When writing their complaint letters, students are tasked with choosing both semantic content and wording that will give their readers two targeted impressions of them: honest and reasonable. I have watched many of my students notably improve their perspective taking skills to a more sophisticated level from this activity. (Plus teenagers love being given not only permission, but also the expectation, to complain!)

Name _____

Date _____

Sample Letter

To Whom It May Concern,

I stayed at the Rolling Thunder Inn South in Boise, Idaho last week, from April 16–21. My brother and sister-in-law stayed in the room next to mine for the same five nights. My bill may be under my brother's name: William Stevens. When we checked in Sunday night, April 16, we were quoted a price of \$79.99. All three of us remember that quote. I specifically remember thinking, "okay, my total will be \$400 for the five nights". The morning we checked out, our bills reflected the price of \$89.99 per night. We brought this discrepancy to the attention of the hotel's staff, but were told that since we had signed a paper the night we arrived that had the \$89.99 price on it, we were responsible for that price.

I am asking that we receive a refund for the difference between our quoted price and the price we were charged for two reasons. First, although I understand that a signature is legally binding, I would like you to consider that we arrived at the hotel close to midnight after driving for fourteen hours, and were extremely motivated to finish the check-in process quickly since we were all exhausted, and did not notice the small printed price on the form we signed. And, it was your staff's mistake to print a different price on that form than the price they quoted to us seconds earlier. Second, my brother, sister-in-law, and I have all stayed at your hotel previously. My brother's daughter (my niece) lives two miles from your hotel, and so we planned to continue staying at your hotel every time we visit her in Boise. If we do not receive a refund of \$50 each (one refund for me and one for my brother and sister-in-law) we will not stay at your hotel again. Your hotel will essentially lose hundreds or thousands of dollars over time if you choose not to honor the price you quoted us the night we arrived.

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Lisa Thompkin

Therapeutic Notes

Reader Presupposition: Complaint Letters

I use this activity to work on listener/reader presupposition. In earlier therapy sessions, I've discussed with my students the importance of always considering your communicative partner's perspective and adjusting your words and behaviors accordingly for two reasons. I explain that it's important to be altruistic and be kind to others, and it's also important to look out for yourself by giving others the best possible impression of you. This activity focuses on the latter.

I start this activity off by telling my students that this is an actual complaint email I sent (I've used pseudonyms here). I explain that whenever we speak or write to someone, we need to consider how our words affect them, and in cases where we are making a request we need to particularly consider how everything we say gives the other person an impression of us. In this situation, where I am requesting compensation, there are two impressions of myself I want to give: **honest** and **reasonable**.

To Whom It May Concern, (I explain to my students that since the Rolling Thunder Inn is a hotel chain, I looked up an email address on their website for customer service. Also "To Whom It May Concern" is the appropriate opening to use when you don't know the name of the person you are addressing.)

I stayed at the Rolling Thunder Inn South in Boise, Idaho last week, from April 16–21. My brother and sister-in-law stayed in the room next to mine for the same five nights. My bill may be under my brother's name: William Stevens. (I explain that I provide these specific pieces of information because the first thing the person who receives this email will do is check Rolling Thunder Inn's records to verify my stay there.) When we checked in Sunday night, April 16, we were quoted a price of \$79.99. All three of us remember that quote. I specifically remember thinking, "okay, my total will be \$400 for the five nights". (The previous two sentences help make me seem **honest**; by discovering these details about my thought process, the reader can now relate to my story.) The morning we checked out, our bills reflected the price of \$89.99 per night. We brought this discrepancy (I make sure my students know this word and see how it makes note of the staff's mistake) to the attention of the hotel's staff, but were told that since we had signed a paper the night we arrived that had the \$89.99 price on it, we were responsible for that price. (I explain that the first paragraph should give all the background information, and must be clear while providing specific information.)



I am asking that we receive a refund for the difference between our quoted price and the price we were charged for two reasons. (I emphasize that the second paragraph begins with my request.) First, although I understand that a signature is legally binding, *(I ask my students why they think I provided evidence here against my position. We connect this technique to writing a persuasive essay where you choose to mention an argument your opposition would propose and then dispute it. But, much more importantly, I explain that admitting evidence against my position makes me come across as **reasonable**.)* I would like you to consider that we arrived at the hotel close to midnight after driving for fourteen hours, and were extremely motivated to finish the check-in process quickly since we were all exhausted, and did not notice the small printed price on the form we signed. (I tell my students that here is where I try the “pity approach”, and I often read the preceding lines in a pitiful tone for their amusement. I also point out that I made sure to mention the small size of the printed price.) And, it was your staff’s mistake to print a different price on that form than the price they quoted to us seconds earlier. *(I note that I made sure to point out the error the hotel staff made.)* Second, my brother, sister-in-law, and I have all stayed at your hotel previously. My brother’s daughter (my niece) lives two miles from your hotel, and so we planned to continue staying at your hotel every time we visit her in Boise. If we do not receive a refund of \$50 each (one refund for me and one for my brother and sister-in-law) we will not stay at your hotel again. Your hotel will essentially lose hundreds or thousands of dollars over time if you choose not to honor the price you quoted us the night we arrived. (I explain to my students that here is where I threaten the hotel chain, and that it’s okay to make this type of threat, that usually a monetary threat is the type of threat a company will respond to, and that it’s important to word it politely. I also discuss that my use of the word “honor” is a psychological strategy that could make the receiver of this email feel dishonorable if he or she doesn’t grant me the refund.)

Thank you for your consideration of my request. (Again, I emphasize the importance of being polite: because it’s good to be kind to others [altruism], and because it makes me come across as **reasonable** which would make the email’s receiver more likely to give me a refund [self-interest]).

Sincerely,

Lisa Thompkins



When we finish I ask my students if they think I received the refund. (I did!) One of my students was clever enough to deduce that I had received the refund because, as he put it, “if you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have had us do this activity.”

The next activity is to have students write their own letters, keeping in mind their goals: to describe the given situations clearly, and to come across as honest and reasonable. Included are two given situations.

Notes for California Pizza Kitchen complaint letter:

Students must choose whether they want to ask for \$200 to replace the boots or \$35 to have them cleaned. We discuss the advantage and disadvantage of each choice:

Asking for \$200 — The restaurant chain would be less likely to proffer the higher sum of money, but then you would be able to replace the boots.

Asking for \$35 — The restaurant chain would be more likely to proffer this small sum of money, but your boots may not end up salvaged.

Notes for Green Valley movie theater complaint letter:

Students must choose what kind of compensation they want to request.

Since it’s implied in the situation that the student and his/her friend do not plan to return to Green Valley anytime soon, I emphasize the importance of including in the complaint letter the fact that the town of Green Valley is a four-hour car ride away and its local movie theater is not part of a chain near their hometown; hence, movie coupons would be valueless.



Name _____

Date _____

Directions: Write a two-paragraph letter of complaint/request.

Your situation:

You and your family celebrated your mom's birthday at the California Pizza Kitchen in Westbury, Long Island this past Saturday night. During the meal, your waiter accidentally spilled a glass of Coke on you, soaking your shirt and pants. He apologized profusely, and the manager came over. She offered to pay to have your clothes dry cleaned, but you declined since you were wearing a "run-of-the-mill" flannel top and old jeans. Also, you thought the Coke would come out when you washed your clothes, and it did. So instead the manager gave you and your family free desserts at the end of the meal.

However, what you didn't realize until you got home later that evening was that you were wearing your new suede boots, and the Coke that spilled onto your boots ruined the suede. You feel you should be compensated, because it was the waiter's fault, not yours, that the suede got ruined. Your boots cost \$200 and you still have the receipt. You called two different dry cleaners and were told by both that it would cost \$35 to have your boots cleaned, but there was no guarantee that the suede could be salvaged.

Write the letter:

The first paragraph should describe the events. (*what happened*)

The second paragraph should start with your request for compensation, and then should include the reasons why you believe your request should be granted. (*why they should give you what you are requesting*)



Name _____

Date _____

Directions: Write a two-paragraph letter of complaint/request.

Your situation:

You and your friend took a weekend trip to the small town of Green Valley. You left Friday evening and drove four hours to get to the Green Valley Motel. You had a good time, visiting shops and eating out, until Sunday afternoon when you and your friend went to the local movie theater and bought two overpriced tickets (\$21 each!) to see the latest action movie. For the first five minutes of the movie the sound wasn't working, and then for the next twenty minutes, although the sound was on, there was a vertical line going down the middle of the screen. By then you both felt the movie experience had been ruined, and you went to the box office to get a refund. The teenager in the box office said that he could not give you a refund, and that you would have to speak to the manager who was currently at another movie theater, a fifteen-minute drive away.

You drove to the other theater to speak to the manager, but much to your surprise he said he wouldn't give you a refund, and would only offer you each a coupon to see a different movie. He wouldn't give in, even after you and your friend explained that you had already seen every other movie playing at the two small theaters, and you couldn't use the coupon another day since you were leaving Green Valley that evening and lived four hours away!

Write the letter:

The first paragraph should describe the events. (*what happened*)

The second paragraph should start with your request for compensation, and then should include the reasons why you believe your request should be granted. (*why they should give you what you are requesting*)

