

20

A BIT OF A PROBLEM

In this lesson

- Focus on expressing yourself more politely in English.
- Read and listen to understand specific words and phrases.
- Study and practise tentative language and ways of explaining problems.
- Practise making and dealing with complaints.



Speak for yourself

1 Read the questionnaire. Tick (✓) the option which best describes you.

- At a restaurant, your meal is not very hot. Do you ...?
 - demand to see the manager.
 - ask the waiter to heat it up for you.
 - grumble to your companions, but avoid making a scene.
 - eat it, but write to the manager later.
- You bought a cassette recorder which turns out to be faulty. Do you ...?
 - accept a credit note or exchange.
 - ask firmly for your money back.
 - go to the shop and demand to see the manager.
 - shrug your shoulders and forget about it.
- The flight you reserved a seat on turns out to be overbooked. Do you ...?
 - wait patiently to be put on another flight.
 - shout at the check-in assistant.
 - insist that you are given a seat on the plane.
 - complain vociferously to your fellow passengers.
- You called the plumber but he never turned up. Do you ...?
 - not make a fuss but say you'll take your custom elsewhere in future.
 - threaten to tell the whole neighbourhood how unreliable he is.
 - phone and ask him to come immediately.
 - forget about it.

2 In pairs, compare your ideas. When did you last make a complaint? What happened?

Reading

Finding specific information

- 1 Read the extracts about how to complain. What advice is given for each situation?
- 2 Would the same advice apply in your country?
- 3 **Against the clock!** In pairs, you have **eight minutes** to decide on the meaning of the words and expressions in **bold**.

know your *rights*

AT A RESTAURANT

When you eat out, whether in a café, restaurant, or pub, you enter into a contract with those providing the service. Under the contract, the standard of service and food provided must be reasonable. What is reasonable will depend on many factors, such as the type of establishment and the price paid. Should the food or service **fail to live up to your expectations**, it is best to act immediately, when there is the maximum opportunity of **rectifying the situation**. Your complaint should first be addressed to the waiter serving you. Only when the waiter is unable or unwilling to put things right should you complain to the manager. If you have failed through reasonable discussion to put things right satisfactorily, you could consider making a deduction from your bill.

FAULTY GOODS

Before you return a faulty item, be clear exactly what it is that you want. Do you want a repair, replacement, or full refund, or will you accept a credit note? It is always a good idea to ask to see the manager or person in authority, to show that **you mean business** right from the start. It is important to adopt the right tone. The last thing you want to do is **antagonize** the person you are dealing with. Make your complaint politely but firmly, and avoid **getting into a row**. Wherever possible, take your receipt or other proof of purchase. Find out what your legal rights are; this will give you confidence, and put you in a stronger bargaining position.

OVERBOOKING OF FLIGHTS

Some airlines deliberately overfill their flights on the assumption that several **would-be passengers** will cancel, leaving a neat fully-booked flight. Should you be unable to get a seat on the flight you booked, **the airline is in breach of contract**, and may have to pay you compensation for whatever loss you have suffered, provided it is one that could not reasonably have been foreseen.

BROKEN APPOINTMENTS

If a repair man has **undertaken** to call at a certain time, and either doesn't turn up, or arrives very late, he has broken part of his contract, and **you are entitled to compensation**. Deduct a reasonable sum from the bill for wasted time and inconvenience, and send a letter explaining why you have paid less than asked. You can claim for extra telephone calls, and additional expenses such as using a launderette for your washing, if it is your washing machine that needs repairing. If you have had to take time off work, **you can claim for loss of earnings** too.

Which? Publications

Did you notice...?


☞ Should the food or service fail to live up to your expectations, it is best to act immediately.

☞ Should you be unable to get a seat on the flight you booked, the airline may have to pay you compensation.

- 1 How could you express the first part of these sentences in another way?
- 2 How does the use of *should* alter the style of the sentences?

Listening

Focus on politeness

- 1 In pairs, improvise these conversations.
 - A customer phones a mail order company to complain that a book has not arrived.
 - A software retailer phones a wholesale outlet to complain that he hasn't received the number of CD-ROMs he ordered.
- 2  Listen and compare your conversations with those on the tape.
- 3 Turn to the Tapescript on p.117 and listen again. Highlight any words / expressions that make the conversations more polite.
- 4 Did you use any of the polite expressions in your conversations?

Pronunciation

- 1 Listen to some negative sentences. Note down the stressed words in each.
- 2 Notice how the words are linked. How is the final /t/ pronounced before a consonant?
- 3 Listen again and repeat.



Vocabulary

Explaining problems

- 1 **Against the clock!** You have **three minutes** to read the complaints and decide if they could refer to ...

- a car
- central heating
- a computer
- a toilet
- a TV set
- a camera

- 1 The screen keeps going blank.
- 2 I'm having problems downloading things.
- 3 I can't get it to go into second gear.
- 4 It won't flush properly.
- 5 It keeps crashing.
- 6 I've been having problems with the thermostat.
- 7 The shutter keeps jamming.
- 8 I can't get it to start.
- 9 It won't come on.
- 10 It keeps stalling.

- 2 Which of these problems have you experienced?

- 3 Note down possible problems with different appliances.

- 4 In pairs, ask and answer about your problems, using some of the language in 1. Give advice.

It keeps ... It won't ... I can't get it to ... I'm having problems ...

Language work

Tentative language

Polite expressions

It is common in English to use tentative language if there is a disagreement or misunderstanding, to prevent the other person 'losing face'.

Perhaps / Maybe ... there's been a mistake.

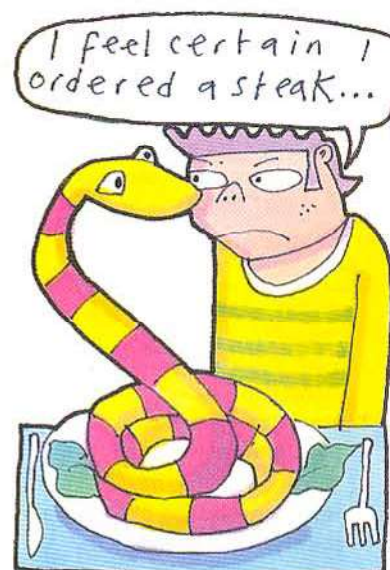
Are you sure you ordered a hundred?

I feel certain / I'm pretty sure ... we ordered two boxes.

I understood / I thought I would be seen to today.

- 1 Make these statements more polite using one of the expressions above.

- 1 Did you turn the machine on?
- 2 I posted the letter last week.
- 3 You said I could exchange it if it was the wrong size.
- 4 We never promised to have it ready by Thursday.
- 5 You promised I could have a refund.
- 6 You told me you wanted ten copies, not twenty.
- 7 You don't know how to operate the machine.
- 8 You obviously didn't follow the instructions correctly.



The use of seem

☞ You don't seem to have sent us enough.


Even if you are sure there is a problem, use *seem* to sound more polite.

There seems to be a problem with the order.

It doesn't seem to be printing properly.


We seem to have got lost.

2 **Focus on form** Which three patterns follow the word *seem* above?

3  Listen to ten statements and make them sound more polite by using the correct form of *seem*.

4 In pairs, act out conversations using some of the problems in 3.


Pronunciation

1  Listen to the intonation of some of the expressions in *Against the clock!*

2 Listen again and repeat.

English in use

Dealing with problems

 **Against the clock!** You have **three minutes** to match expressions 1 to 12 to the headings.

Apologizing Making a request Expressing sympathy Offering to help

- 1 I'm sorry about that.
- 2 I'll do my best to sort it out for you.
- 3 If you could just bear with me a couple of moments.
- 4 Sorry about the misunderstanding.
- 5 I don't suppose there's any way you could get it to me by tomorrow?
- 6 I'm sorry you've been inconvenienced.
- 7 I can understand why you're upset.
- 8 I'll get back to you as soon as I can.
- 9 I was rather hoping you could give me a refund.
- 10 I do understand.
- 11 I'll look into it.
- 12 I do apologize.



Speak out

Remember

- Use a range of polite expressions.
- Use different expressions and language to explain problems.
- Concentrate on your intonation and word linking.

1 In pairs, **A** and **B**, take it in turns to make a phone call to make and deal with complaints. **A** turn to p.105 and **B** to p.108.

I'm phoning to ... I'm phoning about ...

2 After the roleplays, decide ...

- how successful the outcomes of the conversations were.
- how you would have dealt with these situations in your own country.

Follow-up

- 1 Think about a real problem you have had with something you have bought or ordered. Write a dialogue in which you complain.
- 2 If you are living in an English-speaking environment, note down examples of polite language you hear this week.
- 3 Choose three personal or household appliances, and think about things that can go wrong with them. Use your dictionary to research vocabulary to describe the problems.