

How to Complain Politely in English

Name the problem, soften, state the fix — the calm-complaint toolkit

EPISODE 25 • LEVEL B1-B2

Episode summary

- When something goes wrong in English, most learners fail in two ways: they explode, or they suffer in silence. Neither one fixes the soup. The calm complaint is the third way — and it gets results.
- The three-move complaint works everywhere: name the problem, not the person; soften with a calm opener; state the fix you want. I am sorry to bother you, but this soup is cold. I would like it hot, please.
- Load the machine with five softening openers: I am sorry to bother you, but... I think you may have... There seems to be a mistake... I am afraid there may be a misunderstanding... I am not happy with...
- Use the same three moves in the four scenes where complaints happen: the cold soup at the restaurant, the noisy room at the hotel, the broken shirt at the shop, the late delivery on the phone. On the phone, your voice must do the smiling.
- When they say no, climb the ladder: repeat calmly, ask for the manager, put it in writing. Be kind to the person, firm about the problem. Calm gets fixed. Anger gets ignored.

What's inside this PDF

20 key words • the calm-complaint toolkit • the four scenes • Say It Better upgrades • 3 practice exercises

Key Vocabulary

20 words from this episode — learn them, then use them this week

1. complain

to say you are not happy, calmly.

> I would like to complain about the noise.

2. complaint

the problem you report.

> I have a small complaint about my room.

3. refund

money back.

> Could I have a refund, please.

4. exchange

a new one for the broken one.

> I would like to exchange this shirt.

5. misunderstanding

when the facts got mixed up.

> I am afraid there may be a misunderstanding.

6. broken

not working, or damaged.

> The zipper is broken.

7. delay

late, the formal word.

> There was a delay with my package.

8. noisy

too much sound.

> The room is noisy.

9. bill

the paper that says what you pay.

> There seems to be a mistake on the bill.

10. repair

to fix something broken.

> Could you repair this, please.

11. soften

to make your words gentle.

> Soften the complaint with a calm opener.

12. opener

the first words of a complaint.

> Use a soft opener first.

13. fix

what you want done.

> State the fix you want.

14. calm

quiet and controlled.

> Stay calm and speak slowly.

15. polite

kind and respectful.

> A polite complaint gets help.

16. bother

to trouble someone.

> I am sorry to bother you, but...

17. receipt

the small paper that proves you paid.

> Keep the receipt for the exchange.

18. manager

the person in charge.

> Could I speak to a manager, please.

19. ladder

steps that go up.

> Climb the ladder calmly.

20. temper

quick anger.

> Control your temper before you speak.

The Calm Complaint

three moves, five openers, one fix-ask

The three moves

“Name the problem, not the person. Soften. State what you want.”

The five openers

“I am sorry to bother you, but... I think you may have... There seems to be a mistake... I am afraid there may be a misunderstanding... I am not happy with...”

The fix-ask

“End with what you want: I would like a refund, please. What can we do about this.”

The ladder

“Repeat calmly. Could I speak to a manager, please. Put it in writing.”

The rule

“Be kind to the person, firm about the problem. Calm gets fixed. Anger gets ignored.”

Say It Better — 10 upgrades

☐ “You! This food is bad!”

☐ “I am sorry to bother you, but this soup is cold.”

☐ “This is bad service.”

☐ “I am not happy with the service.”

☐ “I want my money back!”

☐ “I would like a refund, please.”

☐ “You are wrong!”

☐ “I am afraid there may be a misunderstanding.”

☐ “Come here now!”

☐ “Could you come over for a moment, please.”

☐ “I will never come back here!”

☐ “I hope we can fix this.”

☐ “Do your job!”

☐ “Could you help me with this.”

Practice Time

3 exercises — do them today, not “someday”

Exercise 1 — Fill in the blank

Word bank: complain • complaint • refund • exchange • noisy

1. I would like to _____ about the noise in my room.
2. A _____ is the problem you report, calmly.
3. Could I have a _____, please — my money back.
4. The room is too _____. I cannot sleep.
5. There seems to be a _____ on the bill.

Exercise 2 — Say it like a local

Upgrade each one to calm complaint English (answers below):

1. “You! This food is bad!” > Soften it:
2. “I want my money back!” > Name the fix politely:
3. “Come here now!” > Make it a calm request:

Exercise 3 — The three-move complaint

Say a full complaint out loud: “I am sorry to bother you, but this soup is cold. I would like it hot, please.” Then build your own: name the problem, soften, state the fix. Say all three versions three times — slow, faster, eyes closed.

- Restaurant: I am sorry to bother you, but this soup is cold.
- Hotel: my room is noisy. Could I move to a quieter room, please.
- Phone: my delivery is late. What can we do about this.

Answer key

Ex 1: 1 complain • 2 complaint • 3 refund • 4 noisy • 5 mistake

Ex 2: 1 “I am sorry to bother you, but this soup is cold.” 2 “I would like a refund, please.” 3 “Could you come over for a moment, please.”