

Writing: change a plan politely

English A2

What this topic teaches

Plans break; politeness does not. Changing a plan in writing is a four-step dance: **apologise**, reason, **proposal**, confirm. Do the four steps in order and nobody loses face.

- The steps: Sorry + the reason + the new idea + a question to confirm.
- The ladder: Sorry (friends) to I am very sorry (teachers); please rides everywhere.
- Memory hook: a polite change is a **bridge**, not a wall.

The four-step skeleton

Step	Job	Example
1. apologise	name the break	Hi Ana. Sorry, I cannot come on Saturday.
2. reason	one honest line	My cousin arrives that morning.
3. proposal	the new idea	Could we meet on Sunday instead?
4. confirm	a question that closes	Would 10 o'clock work for you?

- Steps 1 and 2 are the wall down; steps 3 and 4 are the bridge up.
- The message ends on a question so the reply has somewhere to land.

the wall comes down: what breaks, and why

the bridge goes up: a new idea, a question

1 apologise

Sorry, I cannot come
on Saturday.

2 reason

My cousin arrives
that morning.

3 proposal

Could we meet on
Sunday instead?

4 confirm

Would 10 o'clock
work for you?

End on a question, so the reply has somewhere to land.

Ana's message step by step: two steps take the wall down, two put the bridge up

■ A first try

Label the four steps.

- *Dear Mr Wang, I am very sorry, but I will miss Friday's class because I have a doctor's appointment. (1, 2) I will ask Mei for the notes. Could I hand in my homework on Monday? (3, 4) Lin.*

The politeness ladder

Situation	Apology	Request
friend, small change	Sorry!	Can we move it to 3?
classmate, same-day	I am sorry, but...	Could we...?
teacher, formal	I am very sorry, but...	Would it be possible to...?

- The apology climbs faster than the request: by the teacher rung, both are at the top.
- *instead* is the bridge word: *on Sunday instead* turns a refusal into a proposal.

Two worked messages

1. To a friend (changing football): *Hi Bo, sorry, I cannot play on Thursday. My music lesson moved to 5. Is Sunday morning OK? We could use the school pitch. Lin*

2. To a teacher (missing a class): *Dear Ms Gao, I am very sorry, but I will be away on Friday because of a family matter. I will collect the notes from Mei. Would it be possible to hand in the homework on Monday? Thank you. Lin*

- Same skeleton, different ladder rungs; the friend message takes 20 seconds, the teacher message 30.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Do not only say no: *I cannot come* alone is a wall; add the reason and the new idea to build the bridge.
- Do not over-apologise: one sorry at the top is polite; three sorries in one line read as panic.
- Answer the original question in your reply (yes or no first), then change the plan.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. Name the four steps in order. – **Apologise, reason, proposal, confirm.**
2. Write step 3 for: *I cannot meet on Saturday* (propose Sunday, 10 o'clock). – ***Could we meet on Sunday at 10 o'clock instead?***

3. Which rung: changing a class time with your teacher? – **The top rung:** *I am very sorry, but... Would it be possible to...?*
4. Where does *instead* go: the refusal or the proposal? – **The proposal:** *on Sunday instead.*

■ Practice: write the message

Task. You planned to go to the cinema with your friend Leo on Friday evening, but your mum needs your help at home. Write to Leo (about 40 words): apologise, give the reason, suggest another day, and ask if it's OK.

Model: *Hi Leo, I'm sorry, but I can't come to the cinema on Friday. My mum needs my help at home because my grandparents are visiting. Could we go on Saturday afternoon instead? Is three o'clock OK for you? Max* (39 words)

The four steps, in order, at the friend rung: *Sorry* (1), *My mum needs my help* (2), *Saturday afternoon instead* (3), *Is three o'clock OK?* (4).

Task 2 (a teacher). Your English speaking test is on Wednesday at 2.00, but you have a swimming competition for the school that afternoon. Write to Mr Hall (about 40 words): apologise, give the reason, suggest a new time and ask him if it is convenient.

Model: *Dear Mr Hall, I am very sorry, but I cannot do the speaking test on Wednesday at 2.00, because I am swimming for the school that afternoon. Would it be possible to do it on Thursday morning instead? Is 9.00 convenient for you? Lin* (44 words)

The top rung: *I am very sorry, but...* and *Would it be possible to...?*; the reason is the school's, so it is easy to accept; *convenient* is the polite word for *OK* here.

■ Practice: answer a changed plan

Your friend Bo writes: *"Sorry, I can't play on Thursday. Is Sunday morning OK?"* You are busy on Sunday morning but free in the afternoon. Reply in about 30 words.

Model: *Hi Bo, no problem! I'm busy on Sunday morning because I have a piano lesson. Could we play in the afternoon instead? Is two o'clock OK? Lin* (27 words)

The same four steps work for a reply: accept kindly (*no problem*), give your own reason, propose, and close with a question.