

Writing: explain a problem and request a solution

English B1

What this topic teaches

A B1 problem message is a small machine with four gears: the situation, the problem, the effect, the request. Turn them in order, and the reader repairs instead of argues.

- The situation orients: one sentence of who-where-what.
- The problem is factual: dates, numbers, what happened.
- The effect makes it matter: why it causes you trouble.
- The request names the fix and a deadline.
- Memory hook: facts first, feelings measured, ask clearly - **make a case, not a scene**

The four-gear machine

Gear	Job	Example (a broken locker)
situation	who, where, what	I use locker 214 in the science block.
problem	the facts	Since Monday, the door has not locked.
effect	why it matters	I carry my lab coat to every class.
request	the fix + when	Could you repair it before Friday?

- Gears in order: a request before the facts sounds like a complaint; facts before the request sound like a case.
- One problem per message: two problems halve the attention each receives.



Facts first, the fix last: turned in order, the reader repairs instead of arguing.

The broken-locker message, gear by gear: facts first, the fix last

■ A first try

Label the gears.

- *Dear Sir or Madam, I bought kettle model K3 at your River Road store on 3 May. (situation) It stops heating after two minutes. (problem) I cannot make tea for my family. (effect) Could you replace it or repair it within two weeks? (request)*
Lin

Tone: firm, polite, human

B1 formal does not mean cold. Match the tone to the reader.

Reader	Opening	Request
a shop	Dear Sir or Madam,	I would be grateful if you could...
a school	Dear Ms Gao,	Could you please...
a friend	Hi Bo,	Can you...?

- Firm on the facts, soft on the person: *The door does not lock* (fact) not *your lockers are terrible* (attack).
- I would be grateful is the strongest polite gear in the machine.

Linking the gears

Connectors are the machine's belt.

- *Since Monday* (time), *because of this* (effect), *therefore I would like* (request).
- Each gear hands over to the next: *Since Monday* takes the reader from the situation to the problem, and *Because of this* from the problem to its effect.
- Do not repeat the whole story in the request: *Could you repair the door* is enough, not *could you repair the door that has not locked since Monday*.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Do not open with blame: *Your product is terrible* ends the conversation before the facts arrive.
- Do not hide the request at the end of a long paragraph: it gets its own line.
- Dates and numbers are your witnesses: since Monday, model K3, locker 214 - write them all.

■ Worked example: from a scene to a case

A student wrote this to the school office:

Hi, your lockers are terrible!!! Locker 214 is broken and I have to carry everything, my coat, my books, everything, every day. Also the lights in the corridor don't work. Fix it.

The same message with the four gears:

Dear Ms Gao,

I use locker 214 in the science block. Since Monday, the door has not locked, so I cannot leave anything in it. Because of this, I carry my lab coat and books to every class.

Could you please arrange a repair before Friday?

Best regards,

Wang Lei

What changed:

- **The blame went, and the facts came in.** *Your lockers are terrible* became the locker number, the place and *since Monday*.
- **The effect is one clear sentence**, not a list that grows with every comma.
- **The corridor lights left.** They are a real problem, but they belong in a second message, so the locker gets all the attention.
- **The order became a request with a deadline.** *Fix it* is an order; *Could you please arrange a repair before Friday?* asks, and still says exactly what and when.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. Name the four gears in order. – **Situation, problem, effect, request.**
2. Facts or attack: *the door does not lock* vs *your lockers are terrible*. – ***The door does not lock*** is a fact; the other is an attack on the reader.
3. Write the request gear for the kettle letter. – For example: ***I would be grateful if you could replace or repair the kettle within two weeks.***
4. Where does the request live in the message? – **On its own line**, near the end, never buried in the story.

■ Practice: write the message

Task. You ordered a pair of headphones online from SoundShop. They arrived on 12 June, but the left side makes no sound. You need them for an online English course that starts in ten days. Write to SoundShop (about 70–80 words).

Model:

Dear Sir or Madam,

I ordered a pair of BeatLite headphones from your website, order number 55821, and they arrived on 12 June. Unfortunately, the left side makes no sound at all, even with a different phone. Because of this, I cannot use them for my online English course, which starts in ten days.

I would be grateful if you could send me a new pair before then.

Yours faithfully,

Chen Yu

Why it works. Situation (the order number and date), problem (one fact, tested:

even with a different phone), effect (the course, with a deadline), request on its own line with a time. *Unfortunately* and *because of this* are the belt between the gears. There is no blame, and no repeat of the whole story in the request. (*Yours faithfully* goes with *Dear Sir or Madam*; with a name, write *Yours sincerely* or *Best regards*.)