ESL LAB

Workplace Christmas English

December at work comes with its own English: the party invitation, Secret Santa, small talk with colleagues you barely know, a short toast, greetings to clients and the out-of-office reply. Six activities in the order they happen, numbered like the blog post on esllaboratory.com.

LEVEL	STUDENTS	GROUPING	TIME
B1 to C1	Working adults	Pairs, groups, self-study	10 to 20 minutes an activity

Lucas's December, one activity a date

DECEMBER TUE
1
1. Who Is It For?
Replying to the party invitation
Page 2

DECEMBER FRI
4
2. The Diplomatic Reply
Secret Santa and other gifts
Page 3

DECEMBER FRI
18
3. The Party Mingle
Small talk at the office party
Page 4

DECEMBER FRI
18
4. The One-Minute Toast
Saying a few words
No printing

DECEMBER MON
21
5. Too Casual for a Client
Holiday cards and emails
Page 5

DECEMBER WED
23
6. Out of Office
The last email before the break
Page 6

For the teacher

Who is Lucas? He started in Finance in September. Each page is one of his December dates, so students follow one story from the invitation to the out-of-office reply.

Teach the phrases first. Each activity page has its phrase bank at the bottom. Put three on the board before students start.

Self-study works too. Every page says what to do alone, and page 7 has the answers and model versions.

> The party works for any end-of-year event. If your students' company has a New Year party instead, the English is the same.

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ACTIVITY 1

B1-B2 · 15 min

Who Is It For?

Replying to the party invitation

DEC 1

The reply is short, but the whole team often sees it. The words change with the reader: a team chat is friendly, a manager or a client gets a thank-you.

Three invitations

Invitation A — TEAM CHAT

From Carmen, your team

Hi all! Team lunch on Wednesday, December 16, at Casa Rosa, 1 p.m. Who's in?

Invitation B — EMAIL

From Mr. Hoffmann, your manager

The company end-of-year party is on Friday, December 18, from 6 p.m. in the main office. Please let me know by Friday, December 4, if you can attend.

Invitation C — EMAIL

From Northfield Logistics, a client

Northfield Logistics invites you to our end-of-year reception on Thursday, December 10, from 5 to 7 p.m. Kindly reply by December 3.

Three replies, in a different order

Answer each invitation on a slip: say yes to one, no to another and "not sure yet" to the third. Don't write the letter. **In pairs:** swap slips; your partner ticks who each reply is for. If they can't tell, change the tone. **Alone:** check each reply against the table below.

REPLY SLIP 1

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure yet

PARTNER: WHO IS IT FOR?

☐ A ☐ B ☐ C

REPLY SLIP 2

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure yet

PARTNER: WHO IS IT FOR?

☐ A ☐ B ☐ C

REPLY SLIP 3

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure yet

PARTNER: WHO IS IT FOR?

☐ A ☐ B ☐ C

	TO COLLEAGUES	TO A MANAGER OR CLIENT
Yes	Count me in!	Thank you, I'd love to come.
No	Sorry, I can't make it this year.	I'm afraid I can't make it this year, but thank you for the invitation.
Not sure yet	Can I let you know by Friday?	Could I confirm by Friday, if that's all right?

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ACTIVITY 2

B1-C1 · 15 min

The Diplomatic Reply

Secret Santa and other gifts

DEC 4

A gift at work is never only a gift. Too expensive, too strange or too personal: the right words keep the giver happy and the rules intact.

Secret Santa in four steps

1 THE DRAW	2 THE LIMIT	3 THE GIFT	4 THE REVEAL
Every person draws one colleague's name in secret.	The team agrees on a price limit, so nobody spends too much.	You buy one gift, for that colleague only.	Gifts are opened together. The giver can stay secret.

Choose the diplomatic reply

In groups: read each situation, tick the reply that keeps everybody happy and agree on what is wrong with the other two. **Alone:** tick one reply, write one reason, then check page 7.

SITUATION 1 **A client sends you a very expensive box of chocolates. Company rules say no gifts over 50 dollars.**

- ☐ **A** Thanks!
- ☐ **B** This is so kind of you. Our policy doesn't let me keep it, so I'll share it with the whole team, if that's OK.
- ☐ **C** No, thanks. It's against the rules.

What is wrong with the other two?

SITUATION 2 **Your Secret Santa gift is a mug with a joke you don't understand.**

- ☐ **A** What does this mean?
- ☐ **B** I already have a mug.
- ☐ **C** Ha, I love it. You'll have to explain the joke to me.

What is wrong with the other two?

SITUATION 3 **The team suggests a 100-dollar limit for Secret Santa, and it feels high to you.**

- ☐ **A** Could we go a bit lower, say 25? Then nobody has to worry about it.
- ☐ **B** That's too expensive.
- ☐ **C** (You say nothing.)

What is wrong with the other two?

SUGGESTING A LIMIT	THANKING	SAYING NO KINDLY
Could we go a bit lower, say ...? Then nobody has to worry about it.	That's so thoughtful, thank you. Where did you find it?	This is really kind, but ... I'm afraid I can't accept it.

ACTIVITY 3

The Party Mingle

B1-C1 · 20 min

DEC 18

Small talk at the office party

Cut out the cards, one for each student. Don't show your card. Mingle for ten minutes and talk to as many people as you can. At the end, the class guesses each student's secret goal. **Alone:** choose two cards and write their conversation in eight lines.

New in Finance — CARD 1

You started in September. You know your own team, but almost nobody else in the room.

SECRET GOAL
Find one thing in common with three different colleagues.

TRY
I don't think we've met. I'm ..., from Finance.

The old hand — CARD 2

You have worked in Sales for ten years and you know every story about the company.

SECRET GOAL
Move one conversation away from work and keep it away for two minutes.

TRY
Enough about work! Are you going away for the holidays?

IT support — CARD 3

Half the room has called you this year about a laptop. Tonight you don't want to talk about laptops.

SECRET GOAL
Leave two conversations politely, without saying "I have to go."

TRY
It was great to finally meet you. I'll let you get back to the party.

The trip planner — CARD 4

You work in Marketing and you are organizing next year's team trip.

SECRET GOAL
Find out the holiday plans of three colleagues.

TRY
Any plans for the holidays?

The remote colleague — CARD 5

You work from home in another city. Tonight is the first time you meet the team in person.

SECRET GOAL
Introduce two colleagues who haven't met each other.

TRY
Have you two met? This is ..., from Sales.

The guest from a client — CARD 6

You work for a client company and were invited to the party. You know only the host.

SECRET GOAL
Find out what three people actually do all day.

TRY
So what does a normal day look like for you?

The intern — CARD 7

Your internship ends in January and you would love to stay in the company.

SECRET GOAL
Get one piece of career advice without asking for it directly.

TRY
How did you end up in this job?

The team lead — CARD 8

Later tonight you will give a short toast to your team.

SECRET GOAL
Collect one good moment from this year to use in your toast.

TRY
What was the best part of this year for you?

ACTIVITY 5

B1-C1 · 15 min

DEC 21

Too Casual for a Client

Holiday cards and emails

The same wish changes with the reader. Merry Christmas is warm with colleagues you know celebrate. With clients, Happy holidays or Season's greetings fits whatever the reader celebrates.

Fix Lucas's email

Lucas wrote this to a client. Rewrite it in under 40 words, then tick the checklist.

To	Ms. Duarte, your client at Northfield Logistics
Subject	Happy holidays

Hey!! Merry Xmas, have fun and don't eat too much lol. Talk next year!

MY CLIENT VERSION

Words: _____ / 40

- ☐ No slang, no "lol"
- ☐ One thank-you for the year
- ☐ One wish for the new year
- ☐ Happy holidays or Season's greetings

One wish, three readers

Write the same holiday wish for each reader. **In pairs:** read one out; your partner says who it is for.

A CLOSE COLLEAGUE · EXAMPLE

Merry Christmas! Thank you for all your help this year. See you in January!

A CLIENT

THE CEO, REPLYING TO A MESSAGE TO ALL STAFF

WARM

Merry Christmas!
See you in January!

SAFE FOR CLIENTS

Wishing you a restful holiday season.
Thank you for working with us this year.

FORMAL

Thank you for your message.
Best wishes for the holiday season and the year ahead.

ACTIVITY 6

B1-B2 · 15 min

Out of Office

The last email before the break

DEC 23

An out-of-office reply has four parts, in this order: a thank-you, the dates away, a contact for anything urgent, and when you'll reply.

Put the reply in order

Number the four lines 1 to 4. **Alone or in pairs.** The answer is on page 7.

- ◯ For anything urgent, please contact Marta Lopez at marta.lopez@example.com.
- ◯ I'll reply when I'm back on January 5. Happy holidays!
- ◯ Thank you for your email.
- ◯ I'm out of the office from December 24 to January 4, with no access to email.

Write your own

Use your real dates and a real colleague.

Thank you for your email. I'm out of the office from _____ to _____. For anything urgent, please contact _____ at _____. I'll reply when I'm back on _____. Happy holidays!

Let's pick this up in January

MOVE IT TO JANUARY

On December 22 a client emails you: "Could you send us new prices for next year before the break?" The prices won't be ready until January. Reply in three sentences: thank them, say when they will get the prices, and wish them a good break.

_____

_____

_____

_____

DATES

from December 24 to January 4
back on January 5

MOVING IT

Let's pick this up in the first week of January.
You'll have them by January 8.

CLOSING

Thank you for your patience.
Have a restful break.

TEACHER'S PAGE

Answers and model versions

Keep this page
or give it for self-study

> **Every model here is one good answer, not the only one.** Accept any reply that keeps the meaning and fits the reader.

Activity 1 Who Is It For?	Sample replies. A: *Count me in!* B: *I'm afraid I can't make it this year, but thank you for the invitation.* C: *Thank you for the invitation. Could I confirm by Friday, if that's all right?* Any mix works if the partner can guess the reader.
Activity 2 The Diplomatic Reply	1 B: It thanks the client, explains the rule without blame and finds a way to accept. A sounds like the rule doesn't exist; C sounds like a door closing. 2 C: It thanks the giver first and turns the joke into a conversation. A and B are honest, but they are about the gift, not the person. 3 A: A gives a number and a reason that helps the whole team. B is a complaint with no suggestion, and silence is the reply students regret in December.
Activity 3 The Party Mingle	Ten minutes, then call time. Each student guesses one classmate's goal before you reveal the cards. With fewer than eight students, leave out cards 4, 5 and 6. Card 8 links to the toast: the team lead gives it next.
Activity 4 The One-Minute Toast	No printing. Board frame: Thank you all for [one thing]. This year, we [one moment]. Next year, let's [one wish]. Please raise your glasses to [the team].
Activity 5 Too Casual for a Client	Model: *Dear Ms. Duarte, thank you for working with us this year. Wishing you and your team a restful holiday season and a successful new year. Best regards, Lucas* (28 words). Client: *Wishing you a restful holiday season and a successful new year.* CEO: *Thank you for your message, and best wishes for the holiday season and the year ahead.*
Activity 6 Out of Office	Order: 3, 4, 1, 2. January email: *Thank you for your message. The new prices will be ready in the first week of January, and you'll have them by January 8. Have a restful break!*

Listen for these

Congratulations with the New Year	Happy New Year! In English you congratulate a person on an achievement, not on a holiday.
Let's drink for our team!	Here's to the team! In English you drink *to* something.
I will be absent.	I'm out of the office. *Absent* sounds like a note to a school.
I can't do it this year.	I can't make it this year. *Make it* is the fixed phrase for coming to an event.

Every phrase also works for an end-of-year or New Year party. Where your students' company has no Christmas party, keep the language and change the name.