

Tips on how to apologize from the Student Conduct Office

For many Canadians, the word "sorry" tends to roll off our tongues easily. We say it when we make small errors, like unintentionally interrupting someone. We are even known to say sorry when someone else makes a mistake. Offering a quick apology for a small error is an appropriate response. However, a larger conflict where the other party is hurt and our relationship with them is threatened requires a more thoughtful apology.

Thoughtful apologies are powerful. A good apology invites the wounded party to explore the possibility of healing, which is the first step to repairing and potentially strengthening our relationship with them. When we apologize, we grow in maturity by critically reflecting on our actions, validating other perspectives and exercising humility.ⁱ

Below are some guidelines and tips for offering true apologies. We hope you find them helpful.

Key components of an apology

A good apology has four key components:

1. The words "I'm sorry."¹
2. A statement that captures exactly what we are apologizing for
3. An expression of empathy for the negative impact our actionsⁱⁱ
4. A promise to correct our mistakes or avoid making them again

This is an example of a good apology, which is broken down into the four key components:

1. I'm sorry...
2. ... I didn't finish my part of the group project by the due date.
3. It must have been stressful, scary and frustrating when I didn't complete my section on time and send it to you.
4. I will speak with the instructor to let her know the project was incomplete because of me. You shouldn't be docked marks for my mistake.

¹ The words "I'm sorry" are critical because simply saying we "regret" our actions is not enough. The word "regret" is cold and doesn't encompass compassion for the hurt party.

Common mistakes

Below, we recommend avoiding some common mistakes that weaken apologies:

Don't use the word "but."

- When we include a "but" in an apology, it is usually followed by a criticism or an excuse, which counteracts our apology.ⁱⁱⁱ If we use "but" while saying sorry, it has the same impact as an eraser. It erases everything we said before it, regardless of how much compassion we had expressed.

Try not to use the word "if."

- When we include an "if" in an apology, we're not being fully accountable for our actions. Specifically, we acknowledge it's possible we have done something wrong when we should acknowledge we have actually done something wrong.
- We also recommend refraining from using other words that prevent us from taking full accountability for our actions, such as "probably" and "maybe." For example, we suggest saying "I shouldn't have done that" instead of "I probably shouldn't have done that."

Avoid apologizing for the way the other person feels

- Simply expressing sympathy for the wounded party's emotional response is not an apology. Therefore, for instance, we recommend saying "I'm sorry I made a disrespectful and rude joke" rather than "I'm sorry you were offended by my joke." Notice the difference?

Don't blame the other person

- Most conflicts are grey rather than black and white. In other words, both parties likely made mistakes and could have done things better. However, genuine apologies do not place blame on the other person or expect an apology in return. According to Harriet Lerner, a clinical psychologist and academic who has conducted extensive research on apologies, it can be helpful to say, "I'm sorry for my part in this."^{iv}

Try not to overexplain or become defensive

- When we overexplain our actions or defend our intent, we risk pushing the wounded party away instead of creating a vulnerable connection with them.^v It's particularly risky when we say things like "you took it the wrong way" or "it was a joke" because those statements deflect blame and place it on the victim. In short, they're a form of victim blaming.

Don't let your guilt overshadow the apology

- Sometimes we feel really guilty for our actions. While apologizing, we should avoid allowing our guilt to dominate the conversation. We don't want the focus of the conversation to significantly shift from the apology to our need to be reassured or consoled.

Avoid expecting to be forgiven immediately

- In some cases, the hurt party is unable to offer forgiveness. In other cases, it takes time for them to process their feelings and forgive. It's important to give the person time and space to heal, and to avoid pressuring them to forgive us.^{vi}

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ⁱ Harriet Lerner, "The Power of Apologizing: What it Takes to Really be Sorry," *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April 2018, www.psychotherapynetworker.org/magazine/article/1150/the-power-of-apologizing

ⁱⁱ Guy Winch, "The Five Ingredients of an Effective Apology," *Psychology Today*, November 21, 2013, www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201311/the-five-ingredients-effective-apology

ⁱⁱⁱ Harriet Lerner, "The 9 Rules for True Apologies," *Psychology Today*, September 14, 2014, www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-dance-connection/201409/the-9-rules-true-apologies

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Karen Grierson, "Impact vs Intent: Why we Suck at Apologies," *Karen Grierson (Blog)*, January 30, 2018, www.kgrierson.com/uncategorized/impact-vs-intent-suck-apologies

^{vi} Mind Tools Content Team, "How to Apologize: Asking for Permission Gracefully," *Mind Tools*, accessed July 15, 2020, www.mindtools.com/pages/article/how-to-apologize.htm