

Apologizing well

Moderate · 10 min to prepare · Free

A real apology says "I'm sorry," names exactly what you did, shows you get how it affected them, and offers to fix it or do better. In a study of 755 people, the two parts that mattered most were taking responsibility and offering to repair the damage. Skip "but," "if" and "I'm sorry you feel that way," keep the explanation short, and don't demand forgiveness on the spot.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ A few minutes to think before you talk
- ☐ A private time and place, or a phone call instead of a text if it's serious

DO IT LIKE THIS

- 1 **Let them be heard first if they need to.** It can help to let the other person voice their concerns and feel understood before you apologize. See Listening so people feel heard.
- 2 **Say the words "I'm sorry." Saying you "regret" it isn't enough.** It sounds cold.
- 3 **Name exactly what you did, and own it.** "I made a mistake" works better than "Mistakes were made," and "I'm sorry for making that insensitive joke" beats "I'm sorry for whatever I said yesterday". Taking responsibility was the single most important part of an apology in Ohio State research.
- 4 **Show you understand the impact: "It must have been stressful when I didn't send my part on time".**
- 5 **Explain briefly, only if it helps, for example to show it wasn't on purpose and won't happen again.** Long explanations that sound like excuses backfire. "There's no excuse for what I did" is better than a shallow defense.
- 6 **Offer to fix it.** Offering repair was the second most important element in the research. Ask what would mean the most to them, rather than just doing something to ease your own guilt.
- 7 **Commit to doing better, then follow through.** A promise to correct the mistake or avoid it is part of a good apology.

Watch out Watch for words that erase the apology. "But" is usually followed by an excuse or a criticism. "If" ("if I did something wrong") and "probably" dodge accountability. "I'm sorry you were offended" apologizes for their feelings, not your actions. "You took it the wrong way" or "It was a joke" shifts the blame to them.

DAD NOTE *A real apology has no "but" in it.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/people/conflict-without-damage/apologizing-well/

Checked October 2, 2026. Sources: Ohio State University; Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley; University of Calgary Student Conduct Office.