The Power of Saying “I’m Sorry”

“I’m sorry.” Those two words are ones we have all had to say or write in difficult or uncomfortable situations. This article is all about those words, their power, and how to express our regrets and apologies effectively.

By Lynn Gaertner-Johnston
Founder, Syntax Training

I don’t know about parents around the globe, but where I live parents regularly break up spats between small children, instructing them, “I want you two to both say you’re sorry!” After both children complain that it’s not their fault, they reluctantly say they are sorry. With the words “I’m sorry” ending the argument, the children move on to their next activity, often playing happily side by side within minutes.

As adults at work, saying we are sorry seems more complicated. When we say it (and write it), we worry that we may be accepting blame, admitting liability, and apologizing ourselves into a corner. But apologies can free us in many ways. As with children, our apologies let us move on to the next activity. They also free the people to whom we apologize by helping them let go of their bad feelings about the wrong done to them. They help everyone acknowledge that business decisions can negatively affect people’s lives, sometimes deeply and lastingly. Apologies communicate the messages “I respect you” and “I recognize that you are a human being with feelings” without actually using those words.

In speech, “I’m sorry” may be all we need to say. But in writing, an apology requires more. Here is an example of an apology written to a coworker:

Dear Kim,
I am sorry I missed your presentation this morning. I know it was my job to be there to provide the latest financial data, and I am very sorry I let you down. As I mentioned in my phone message, an accident on the bridge caused traffic to back up for nearly an hour. Although I left for work in plenty of time to be there for your presentation, the accident caused me to arrive after your time on the agenda. I emailed the data to you when I arrived. If you would like me to do anything else to make up for my absence, please let me know.
Please accept my apology.
Renee

In the situation above, it might be tempting simply to leave Kim a quick phone message of apology. But the written note makes it clear that Renee regrets what happened and that she does not take it lightly.

This apology covers a more sensitive situation:

Dear Robert,
I wanted to write to you regarding our conversation the other day about the new team member. I apologize for making inappropriate assumptions about your hiring decision. I realize since we talked that I simply liked the candidate from Ghana and was disappointed that I won’t have the chance to work with him. I understand now why you chose Santosh and how she will complement our skills and experience.
I regret the comment I made, and I promise to support Santosh 100 percent. Please accept my apology.
Sincerely,
Randy
Randy’s apology communicates several important things to Robert: that Randy regrets the remark he made, understands that his assumptions were inappropriate, and intends to support the new employee completely. Although Randy might have hesitated to “document” his mistake by mentioning it in writing, he has successfully documented his realization and his apology.

Because written apologies last beyond the moment and do not provide an opportunity for immediate two-way communication, it’s important to follow certain guidelines when writing them. Consider these suggestions and adapt them to your situations:

- **Do** use the words “I apologize,” “I regret,” and “I am sorry.” Use “we” or “on behalf of” when you apologize as a representative.
- **Do** ask the reader to accept your apology. Your request engages the reader and asks for reconciliation.
- **Do** briefly explain what happened, if applicable.
- **Do** name what you will do to remedy the situation, if applicable.
- **Don’t** bring up other topics.
- **Don’t** criticize the reader in any way. For example, don’t say, “If only you had let me know sooner.”
- **Don’t** blame anyone else. For example, don’t say, “My manager insisted that I...”
- **Don’t** offer a “sorry but.” For example, don’t say, “I am sorry, but you must also accept responsibility.” Apologize sincerely for your own behavior.

Sometimes it is beneficial to apologize even though you have done nothing wrong. It’s better to apologize and move on rather than refusing to apologize. Such a refusal saps energy and erects a wall between people.

In awkward situations that seem to require an apology, tell yourself that you will apologize respectfully because the other person needs it. Then apologize. Do not point a finger at the other person with a sentiment like this: “I am sorry you took it the wrong way.” Instead, use statements like these:

- “I am sorry for the part I played in our misunderstanding.”
- “I regret that I was not able to respond in a way that was helpful.”
- “I am sorry that what I said hurt your feelings.”
- “I am sorry about what happened.”
- “I apologize for the frustration this situation has caused you.”
- “I am very sorry we were unable to agree.”

If you are a supervisor or manager, you will find it helpful to apologize when a situation has caused problems or hard feelings—even when you are not responsible for the situation. In these cases, “I am sorry” does not mean “I am responsible.” It means “I care about you and your feelings.” Here are two examples:

- “I am very sorry that the new date for the product launch has affected your vacation plans.”
- “I am sorry that the construction will require you to park so far from the plant.”

Don’t be sorry about apologizing! It is one of the best steps you can take to maintain good relationships, overcome hard feelings, nurture loyalty, and show respect for other human beings.

The mission of Syntax Training is to help employees and managers write better. Syntax Training courses provide participants with tools, tips, strategies, skill practice, feedback, and job aids to help them write better, guaranteed. The company is located in Seattle, Washington, USA.


© Syntax Training. Please contact us for permission to reproduce this copyrighted material in your company publication or on your website, or to distribute it internally.