

Ombuds Office Columbia University

Elements of an Effective Apology

An apology is a powerful means of reconciliation and restoring trust. However, sometimes even a well-intentioned apology can exacerbate a conflict. It may be helpful to consider what elements to include in a statement of apology to make it most effective and constructive.

Not all elements apply to all situations. Some of the most common considerations include the following:

1. A common understanding of the exact substance and nature of the offense, or perceived offense (*Example*: "Yesterday on the telephone, I said...")
2. Recognition of responsibility or accountability on the part of the one who offended
(*Example*: "I could have chosen other words." "I spoke without thinking.")
3. Acknowledgement of the pain or embarrassment that the offended party experienced
(*Example*: "It's understandable that was upsetting to you." "If someone had said that to me, I would not have liked it, either." But not, "I'm sorry you're so easily hurt.")
4. A judgment about the offense (*Example*: "I was insensitive." "What I did was wrong.")
5. A statement of regret (*Example*: "I'm sorry I used those words.")
6. An indication of future intentions (*Example*: "In the future, I will try to think about the impact of my words before speaking." "I hope we can have a relationship of mutual respect.")

Sometimes it is helpful to include an explanation of why the perceived offender acted in this way, but it's important not to reiterate the offense or to give a flippant excuse or defensive justification. (*Example*: "What I did was a poor attempt at humor." But not, "When I'm mad, I can say anything but I don't really mean it.")

The circumstances of the apology are also important, and should be carefully planned. Many people appreciate a written apology, because it implies time and effort put into this step toward reconciliation. Some people who have been offended want an opportunity to state the intensity of their pain or embarrassment directly to the offender. Some people would appreciate a face-to-face apology, and a chance to shake hands or otherwise take the next step toward improved future relations. Some people who apologize want an acknowledgement that the apology has been received, or that the offender is forgiven.