How to Apologize Without Adding “But”



REPAIR NOTES

Repair starts with the specific thing

An apology is easier to trust when the other person can recognize the event and its effect. Start there. You may have context to share, and they may need time before responding. The goal is to take responsibility for your part and make the next action clear.



WHO THIS IS FOR

People repairing an everyday hurt or missed commitment.

BY THE END

Turn a defensive first draft into an apology someone can use.

Name what you did

Use a concrete verb. Missing a call, arriving late and repeating private information are different events. “Sorry about everything” asks the other person to supply the meaning.

Name the action you own.

TRY IT

Write the observable action in a sentence you could say aloud.

The missed pickup



You agreed to collect a parcel before the shop closed and forgot.

WORKED EXAMPLE

“I said I’d collect the parcel today and I forgot. I’m sorry.”

WHAT CHANGES

The commitment and the miss are both clear. You have not made the other person prove it mattered.

Name the action you own.

Acknowledge the effect

Describe the impact you know and leave space for what you do not know. Avoid guessing that someone is devastated or reassuring them that the issue is small. Let their account add information.

Check the impact with the person affected.

TRY IT

Separate what you observed from what you need to ask.

The late handover

You sent a file an hour late. A colleague had to move their review.

WORKED EXAMPLE

“You had to shift your review because the file arrived late. Is there anything else the delay affected?”

WHAT CHANGES

The apology now connects to their day rather than just your intention.

Check the impact with the person affected.

The All-in-One PM Templates Bundle

940+ Premium Templates • One Payment • Lifetime Access

$49

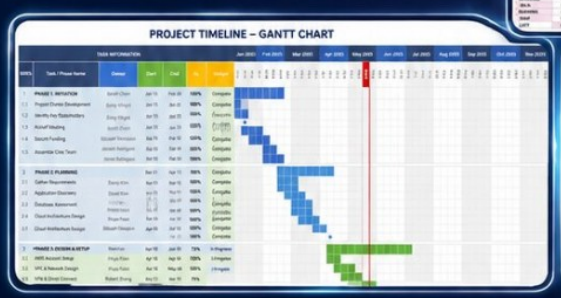
SAVE 94%

Worth $3,300+











EXCEL & GOOGLE SHEETS | PROFESSIONAL & RELIABLE | AUTOMATED DASHBOARDS | SAVE TIME & STAY ON TRACK | INSTANT ACCESS DOWNLOAD

GET LIFETIME ACCESS

Keep the explanation in its place

A genuine constraint may matter to repair or prevention. State your responsibility first. Offer context briefly when it helps the other person understand what will change. Leave out details that merely ask them to excuse you.

Put the repair before the backstory.

TRY IT

Read your draft and remove any sentence that makes the harmed person responsible for your choice.

The wrong room

You sent an old address to a friend and they went to the wrong building. You blame the confusing invitation.

WORKED EXAMPLE

“I copied the old address. I’m sorry you made that trip. I’ll send the correct pin and come meet you outside.”

WHAT CHANGES

The confusing invitation can be discussed later if useful. The immediate repair is getting your friend to the right place.

Put the repair before the backstory.

Offer a repair you can deliver

Match the offer to the harm. Replacing an item, correcting a record or taking on the follow-up can matter more than repeating an apology. Ask whether your offer helps and respect their answer.

Match the audience and size of the repair.

TRY IT

Choose a repair with a clear owner and time.

A joke at someone else's expense

You made a joke in a group that put a colleague on the spot. A private apology may leave a public impression intact.

WORKED EXAMPLE

"I made you the punchline in front of the team. I'm sorry. Would you like me to correct it with the group, or would that draw more attention than you want?"

WHAT CHANGES

The colleague has a say in the repair. You avoid using a public correction mainly to ease your own discomfort.

Match the audience and size of the repair.

Follow through without demanding closure

The person does not owe an immediate “it’s fine.” Give them space. Carry out the repair and make the promised change observable. If the issue repeats, revisit the system behind your behavior.

Keep the next small promise.

TRY IT

Write one specific action the other person could later observe.

The second missed deadline

You have apologized for late feedback before. This time you agree to review only the first three pages by noon.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Send the three pages by noon, with the notes attached. If a new obstacle appears, tell them before the deadline and offer a workable handoff.

WHAT CHANGES

Trust can build from the small promise you actually keep. Reassurance alone cannot do that work.

Keep the next small promise.

Rewrite the apology before sending

Your draft reads, “Sorry you got upset, but everyone was joking.” The actual event was sharing a private story at dinner.

FIRST

Replace the judgment about their reaction with the action. “I told your story at dinner without checking with you.”

THEN

Acknowledge the effect. “That put you in an awkward position.” Say you are sorry and listen if they want to correct your understanding.

FINISH

Offer a boundary for next time. “I’ll ask before sharing anything you told me in private. Is there a repair you want now?”

A useful apology gives the person room to respond while keeping ownership of the mistake with you.

Try three situations

SITUATION 1

You were late because of a genuine transport delay and failed to tell anyone.

SITUATION 2

Your friend says they need time after your apology.

SITUATION 3

You discover the impact was larger than you realized.

Compare your approach

ONE RESPONSE / 1

Apologize for leaving them waiting without an update. Mention the delay briefly if it explains the timing.

Own the part you could control.

ONE RESPONSE / 2

“I understand. I’ll give you space and follow through on what I promised.”

They can choose when to talk again.

ONE RESPONSE / 3

Listen, acknowledge the newly understood effect and adjust the repair with them.

An initial apology can be updated as you learn more.

Take it into your week

01

What I did

02

The effect I know or need to ask about

03

The repair I can offer

04

The change I will follow through on



Learn from 350+ top universities and companies

ILLINOIS

Duke UNIVERSITY

Google

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

IBM

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Invest in your career

Explore new skills

Access 10,000+ courses in AI, business, technology, and more.

A repair in three sentences

You told a private story at dinner without checking first.

01 **Own it**

"I shared your story at dinner without asking. I'm sorry."

02 **Hear the impact**

"That put you on the spot. Is there something about its effect that I missed?"

03 **Repair it**

"I'll leave that story to you in future. Is there anything you'd like me to put right with the group?"

Let them decide whether they want to talk more now.