

Being Polite During Meetings, Conferences, and Negotiations

Even though Americans and other English speaking countries are very “direct” and “straight” in their communication, this doesn’t mean you can be rude or overbearing in your conduct. The following guide will help to soften your language during discussions.

Using Would

Examples

This is unacceptable
That does not meet our requirements
We need further reassurances

Change to:

That *would be* unacceptable
That *would not* meet our requirements
We *would* need further reassurance

Rewrite and put **Would** in the following sentences

1. That is too late.

2. I prefer to meet before that.

3. We expect them to accept our proposals.

4. Flying has definite advantages.

5. I’m not able to gie a guarantee at this stage.

6. Finance is no problem.

7. I don’t agree.

8. I’m afraid I don’t accept that.

Declining an invitation

X Don’t say: “I can’t go.” Say:

That sounds great, but...

I’m sorry, but I really can’t. I have to...

I really appreciate the invite, but...

Example: “Thanks for the invitation, but I’m afraid I already have plans. Maybe next time.”

In English, we don’t typically decline invitations without giving a reason (either real or fake). Simply saying “no” or “no thanks” would be too direct and might be perceived as rude.

Changing Suggestions to Questions

Examples

That is too late
That would be too late

Change to:
Is that too late?
Would that be too late?

Change these suggestions into questions

1. Flying would have advantages.

2. Friday would be more convenient.

3. We would need another meeting fairly soon.

4. We could ask the UN to finance the project.

5. It would be a good idea to involve the French.

6. We could cancel.

7. We've got to increase our offer.

8. They can raise some of the finance themselves.

Telling others you can't help

X Don't say: "I can't help." Say:

I'd love to help, but right now I'm really busy with...

I'm sorry, but the boss just asked me to ...

I wish I could, but right now I need to focus on...

Normally I'd be able to, but right now I have to...

Example: "Any other time I would, but Mr. Jones just asked to see me, so I'm on my way to his office."

Make sentences using three of the phrases above.

1.

2.

3.

Adding n't to suggestions

Is that too late? vs. Isn't that too late?

Both have the same meaning in that you're presenting your suggestion as a question.

"Is that too late?" is a slightly stronger opinion.

"Isn't that too late?" shows that you are more open to changing your mind?

Examples

That is too late

That would be too late

Change to:

Isn't that too late?

Wouldn't that be too late?

Change these suggestions into questions with n't

1. Flying would have advantages.

2. Friday would be more convenient.

3. We would need another meeting fairly soon.

4. We could ask the UN to finance the project.

5. It would be a good idea to involve the French.

6. We could cancel.

7. We've got to increase our offer.

8. They can raise some of the finance themselves.

Saying no to a suggestion/idea

X Don't say: "That's a bad idea." **Say:**

I'm not sure that would work.

I'm afraid that wouldn't work.

That might not be the best solution.

I don't know if that would work.

Example: "That's not a bad idea, but let's look at some more ideas before we make a decision"

Make three sentences using the phrases above.

1.

2.

3.

“Red Flag” Introductory Phrases

“Red Flag” introductory phrases warn the listener that you are about to introduce a negative idea, disagreement, or opposite opinion.

Examples

Actually, I’d rather we meet on Tuesday.

Frankly, I don’t think we should enter a new market right now.

With all due respect, if we do that we’ll lose a lot of money.

(Listed in order from softest to strongest)

Actually,
Well,
In my opinion,

The way I see it,
Honestly,
To be honest,

To tell you the truth,
In fact,
As a matter of fact,

Frankly,
With all due respect,

Make a sentence using each of the introductory phrases for each of the ideas below.

1. _____, that’s probably not the best solution available.
2. _____, maybe we should reconsider our plans.
3. _____, at this point we’re not ready to move forward on that project.
4. _____, our competition won’t be able to catch us if we get an early start.
5. _____, I think we could have had more sales last quarter.
6. _____, I wouldn’t take a chance on promoting Larry. He’s not ready.
7. _____, I never thought Johnson would be able to land that account.
8. _____, sales in our north district have fallen sharply.
9. _____, our competition has already outsold us 2 to 1 this quarter.
10. _____, you need to let Jerry go. His sales have fallen four times in a row.
11. _____, I don’t believe you have the correct facts in front of you.

Pointing out a Mistake

X Don’t say: “You’re wrong.” or “You made a mistake.” Say:

It looks like there may be some mistake here. These figures don’t add up.

It seems like something isn’t working right...

Didn’t we agree on...?/Didn’t we decide...?

I thought we had agreed to/on...

Example: “I thought we had decided to include the recent sales figures in this report, they seem to be missing”

Make three sentences using the phrases above.

1.

2.

3.

I'm afraid

(most common "red flag" phrase)

Conversation Examples

A: Bring me up to date on our sales progress.

B: I'm afraid we didn't meet our sales quota for the month.

A: Could we schedule the conference for the first week of January?

B: I'm afraid Mr. Johnson will be out of the country at that time.

Answer the following questions beginning your sentence with "I'm afraid, ..."

Can we meet again later this week?

1. _____

Couldn't we ask the IMF to fund us?

2. _____

Wouldn't it be a good idea to introduce our new product next month?

3. _____

Could you guarantee delivery by late September?

4. _____

Do you know the chairman personally?

5. _____

Do you have last year's sales figures yet?

6. _____

Where's the report?

7. _____

I thought you were going to bring the files today?

8. _____

Simple requests:

X Don't say: "Come here and help me with this." Say:

Could/can you...?

Would you mind...?

Example: "Tony, would you mind helping me move my heavy desk?"

Make two sentences using the phrases above.

1. _____

2. _____

Qualifiers

Qualifiers tend to lesson the impact of a negative thing.

Examples

Harsh: That will create a problem. Polite: That *might* create a small problem.

seem/s, seems like
a slight

a little
a bit

a little bit
small

a few
some

Add qualifiers to the following sentences.

1. That would leave me with a problem.

2. I have doubts about that.

3. We need more time.

4. We have production difficulties.

5. We had a disagreement with our German colleagues.

6. We need to make changes before we submit our report.

Rewrite these sentences using some form of the qualifiers

Example: This is a weak plan.

Re-written: This seems like a weak plan.

1. This structure is weak.

2. This is the wrong direction for our team right now.

3. I don't want to meet as early as that.

4. If you do that, you'll leave me in a mess with my boss.

5. I can't accept such a tight schedule.

Might (be) replaces Will/Is

Using the verb “will” or “is” can come across as strong or arrogant. Changing “will/is” to “**might**” can soften the suggestion.

Example: We will leave if the director doesn’t show soon.

Re-written: We might leave if the director doesn’t show soon.

Example: It is necessary to build more factories.

Re-written: It might be necessary to build more factories.

Rewrite the sentences below by replacing “will” with “might”

1. If we do that, we will lose that account.

2. If we make that change, Joe will leave the company.

3. It is dangerous to delay a decision.

4. A new product at this time will overburden our production department.

5. It is a good idea to take a long term view of the problem.

6. Using telemarketing will hurt our reputation.

7. An earlier delivery date is helpful.

Permission:

X Don’t say: “Let me use your phone.” Say:

I was hoping you could...

I was wondering if I could...

Do you think I/you might be able to...?

Would it be okay if I ...?

Would it be a problem if I ...?

Example: “Do you mind if I use your computer for just a minute? The computer technician is fixing mine right now.”

Make three sentences using the phrases above.

1.

2.

3.

Not + very + positive adjective

Examples

The hotel was dirty.
The food was cold.

Change to

The hotel wasn't very clean.
The food was not very hot.

Change the following sentences like the above examples.

That's inconvenient.

That's unsuitable.

That's a stupid question.

This year's figures are bad.

That proposal is insensitive to local conditions.

That suggestion is impractical.

That was an unhelpful remark.

That's a destructive approach.

That's a useless line of argument.

I'm unhappy with that idea.

Collocations (words that often go together)

- | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| a) a vested interest | d) a foregone | g) 24/7 | j) join forces |
| b) cut corners | conclusion | h) a stop-gap | |
| c) product launch | e) price war | solution | |
| | f) a disastrous step | i) a debatable point | |

1. It was a ____, everybody knew he'd get the job.
2. That's a ____. One should consider both sides of the problem.
3. As a ____ I'm in favor, but we still need a permanent solution.
4. We have a ____ in John's election. If Mark is elected instead, we'll have to work longer hours.
5. Let's maintain our price. We don't want to get in a ____ with our competition.
6. This is not the time to ____. High quality is still our main goal.
7. Leaving the organization would be a ____ as far as his career is concerned.
8. The two companies will ____ in order to better compete with the industry leader.
9. We're so far behind, we'll have to work ____ in order to catch up on our orders.
10. It seems the best time for a ____ of beverages is in April, just before summer begins.