

How to apologise for a mistake when English is not your first language

Context: You had a meeting booked with senior managers from an important client. You have made a simple scheduling error and had the meeting booked for the same time the following week. To make matters worse when the client tried to contact you – your phone was off as you were on annual leave. They have sent you a cold email highlighting the inconvenience caused.

How can you apologize in this context?

Firstly, email might not be the best course of action. In many situations it can be more powerful and immediate to pick up the phone. On the assumption that a phone call is not possible please find 10 working principles to consider. You might not agree with all of them!

1. **Language:** As an alternative to 'I am sorry', instead use 'I would like to apologize for...'/Please accept our sincere apologies for...'. 'I am sorry' can feel very personal and, in the wrong context, a little too emotional. With some customers it might feel right, but if you need to communicate a professional distance then consider 'apologize'.
2. **Language:** Avoid saying 'I promise' and instead use 'We/I can assure you...'. As with point one, the danger of using 'I promise' is that you can make it sound too personal.

3. **Language:** Consider whether to use 'we' or 'I'. Sometimes it can be more powerful to apologize on behalf of the whole organization or team. At other times taking individual ownership might be more meaningful.

4. **Language:** Communicate empathy and then a clear course of action. 'We would like to apologize for the inconvenience caused and we are determined to resolve the matter, as a next step we would like to suggest...'

5. **Language:** Always state the course of action, both in response to the immediate problem, and to prevent it happening again. 'Would it be possible to reorganize the meeting for another time this week at your convenience? I would like to assure you that this will not happen again and we will be taking the following steps...'

6. **Language:** Avoid tokenistic expressions in this type of email. 'I hope this emails finds you well.' While this type of expression can work in a normal context, it can feel very superficial when emailing difficult information.

7. **Language:** Communicate you want to proactively help in any way you can. 'If I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to call me.'

8. **Tone:** Keep it formal and very professional, apologize but don't be 'over the top' – 'don't gush! Don't bring personal excuses into the email.'

9. **Keep it simple:** As with all email communications avoid long and complex explanations. Keep your email concise and use simple sentences.

 10. **Grammar:** Use the second conditional structure to explore possible next steps. The second conditional conveys a more polite and humble tone. 'If we rescheduled the meeting for next Thursday morning, would this be convenient to you?' Use the modal perfect to highlight lessons learnt. 'I should have informed you that... we will make sure to do that next time.'
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