

Polite Expressions

Below are some common polite expressions we use in the workplace. These polite expressions will help non-native speakers sound more polite and diplomatic.

Saying No

Declining an invitation:

That sounds great, but...

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

I really appreciate the invite, but...

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

Informing someone you can't provide assistance:

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

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

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

Just like with invitations, it's important to provide a reason here. Besides the expressions above, we often mention the name of someone else who might be able to help. Example: *I'd love to help but I'm really busy with these reports. Have you asked Brian? He might be able to help you.*

Saying no to a suggestion/idea:

I'm not sure that would work.

That might not be the best solution.

I don't know if that would work.

That might be a little ambitious.

Telling someone that his/her idea isn't going to work is a delicate situation. In this situation, we tend to use tentative language such as "I'm not sure," "I don't know," and "might." Simply saying "that won't work" or "that's not going to work" might be too direct.

Pointing out a Mistake

It looks like...

It seems...

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

I thought we had agreed to/on...

I seem to remember that we...

By asking questions and using tentative language, we can soften our message. We normally don't want to say "this is wrong" or "you are wrong."

Requests

Simple requests:

Could/can you...?

Would you mind...?

For routine requests (asking someone to do his/her job) we can be fairly direct.

Big requests/favors:

I was hoping you could...

I was wondering if you could...

Would it be okay if...?

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

For big requests and favors, we need to be indirect and polite. Saying "Could/can you..." is often too direct for these situations.

Permission:

I was hoping I could...

I was wondering if I could...

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

Would it be okay if...?

Would it be a problem if...?

If it's something routine and we're sure the person will say yes, we can simply say "Could/Can I...?"

Offers

Making an offer:

Would you like me to...?

Can I help you with...?

If you'd like, I can...

Saying "Do you need help?" could be too direct and might suggest that the person cannot handle the task.

Accepting an offer:

Sure, that would be great.

Yes, thank you.

A simple "thanks" or "thank you" is often sufficient.

Interrupting

Gaining the floor:

Sorry to interrupt, but...

Could I add something?

It's often helpful to say the person's name before "Could I add something?" This helps get the person's attention and makes him/her stop talking.

After interrupting someone:
I'm sorry, you were saying.
I'm sorry, go ahead.

Disagreeing

That's not necessarily true.
I'm not so sure I agree.
I don't know that I agree.
That's not always true.

By partially disagreeing or using indirect, tentative language, we can soften our message and ensure we don't offend our listener.

Redirecting

Maybe we could get back to...
Maybe we could talk about...
Why don't we move on to...?

Using one of these expressions makes for a smooth transition between topics.

Making Suggestions

What about if...
Maybe we could...
I thought it might be a good idea to...
It seems to me that we should...
One thing we might want to consider is...
I think...
I feel like...

Simply saying "we should" is often too direct. We can soften the message by using indirect, tentative language and "we" instead of "I."

Giving Advice

You may/might want to consider...
It might be a good idea to...

Have you thought about...?

Saying “you should” could be too direct, especially if we’re talking to a supervisor, a client, or someone we don’t know very well.

Invitations

I was wondering if you’d like to...

Would you like to...?

If you’re free on (day/date),.../If you aren’t doing anything on (day/date)...

Apologizing

I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...

I’m sorry, I didn’t know...

I apologize. That was my fault.

Prefacing Bad News

I’m very sorry, but...

Unfortunately,...

I’m afraid that...

We typically use these statements to alert our listener that bad news is coming.

Ending a Conversation/Excusing Yourself

Well, I’d better get back to (task you’ve been working on)...

I’ll let you get back to (what other person is working on)...

I have to run/I have to get going. It was nice talking to you.

If we’re going to talk to the person soon (at a meeting, social event, lunch, etc.) we often mention that. Example: *I have to run. I’ll see you at 2 p.m. for our meeting.*