

# The six elements of an effective apology, according to science

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Study finds 6 keys to an effective apology.  
The 2 most important:

1. Acknowledge you were wrong.
2. Offer to fix the problem.

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 THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

A new study found there are six elements to an effective apology. Credit: The Ohio State University

There are six components to an apology - and the more of them you include when you say you're sorry, the more effective your apology will be, according to new research.

But if you're pressed for time or space, there are two elements that are the most critical to having your [apology](#) accepted.

"Apologies really do work, but you should make sure you hit as many of the six key components as possible," said Roy Lewicki, lead author of the study and professor emeritus of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

In two separate experiments, Lewicki and his co-authors tested how 755 people reacted to apologies containing anywhere from one to all six of these elements:

1. Expression of regret
2. Explanation of what went wrong
3. Acknowledgment of responsibility

4. Declaration of repentance

5. Offer of repair

6. Request for forgiveness

The research is published in the May 2016 issue of the journal *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*. Lewicki's co-authors were Robert Lount, associate professor of management and human resources at Ohio State, and Beth Polin of Eastern Kentucky University.

While the best apologies contained all six elements, not all of these components are equal, the study found.

"Our findings showed that the most important component is an acknowledgement of responsibility. Say it is your fault, that you made a mistake," Lewicki said.

The second most important element was an offer of repair.

"One concern about apologies is that talk is cheap. But by saying, 'I'll fix what is wrong,' you're committing to take action to undo the damage," he said.

The next three elements were essentially tied for third in effectiveness: expression of regret, explanation of what went wrong and declaration of repentance.

The least effective element of an apology is a request for forgiveness. "That's the one you can leave out if you have to," Lewicki said.

The first study involved 333 adults recruited online through Amazon's MTURK program. All the participants read a scenario in which they were the manager of an accounting department that was hiring a new employee.

At a previous job, the potential employee had filed an incorrect tax return that understated a client's capital gains income. When confronted about the issue, the job candidate apologized.

The participants were told that the apology contained one, three or all six of the apology components. They were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) how effective, credible and adequate the apology statement would be.

The second study included 422 undergraduate students. The students read the same scenario as in the first study, but instead of being told which components the apology contained, they read an actual apology that included anywhere from one to six statements based on the six elements. For example, for acknowledgment of responsibility, the apology statement read "I was wrong in what I did, and I accepted responsibility for my actions."

They again rated how effective, credible and adequate the apology statement would be.

The results of the two studies were not identical, but they were very similar, Lewicki said. For both studies, the more elements that the apology contained, the more effective it was rated.

When the elements were evaluated one at a time, there was general consistency in the importance of the components across the two studies, with slight variations. But in both studies, the request for forgiveness was seen as least important.

In both studies, half the respondents were told the job applicant's incorrect tax return was related to competence: He was not knowledgeable in all relevant tax codes. The other half were told it was related to integrity: He knowingly filed the [tax return](#) incorrectly.

The value of each of the six components was the same whether the apology was related to failures of competence or integrity. But overall, participants were less likely to accept apologies when the job applicant showed a lack of integrity versus a lack of competence.

Lewicki noted that, in this work, participants simply read apology statements. But the emotion and voice inflection of a spoken apology may have powerful effects, as well.

"Clearly, things like eye contact and appropriate expression of sincerity are important when you give a face-to-face apology," he said.

**More information:** Roy J. Lewicki et al. An Exploration of the Structure of Effective Apologies, *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/ncmr.12073](https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12073)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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