# The Art of Saying No

Refusing Politely Across Cultures | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

## Before You Read

*Discuss these questions with a partner.*

1. When did you last say yes to something you wanted to refuse? Why did you agree?
2. In your language, what do people say when they want to turn down an invitation politely?
3. How might the way people refuse an offer or a request differ between countries, generations, or workplaces?

## Reading: The Art of Saying No

A colleague invites you to a birthday dinner on Saturday. You wanted a quiet evening at home, but you say yes anyway. By Saturday evening, you have started to **resent** a dinner you agreed to. For many people, no is one of the hardest words in any language.

Part of the problem is that we expect a refusal to hurt more than it does. In a series of studies, people who **decline** an invitation tended to **overestimate** how upset the other person would feel. The people who invited them thought more about the reasons and were less upset than expected. The studies looked at everyday events, such as dinners, not weddings. Other research shows something similar. People who ask strangers for small favors get more yes answers than they expect, because saying no feels uncomfortable.

A polite no also sounds different in different places. In the Netherlands and Germany, a direct no is often seen as honest rather than **blunt**. In many other places, **harmony** matters more. A Japanese speaker might say only "Sunday is a little..." and let the sentence **trail off**. In Indian business, "I'll see what I can do" can be a polite no, followed by **vague** updates. In Iran, a guest is expected to refuse more food, and the host is expected to **insist**, often about three times. In China, a gift is often refused two or three times before it is accepted. In these cases, the first no is not meant **literally**. It is part of a **ritual**.

When your answer really is no, a **boundary** helps. It is a clear line that tells people what you can and cannot give. You don't have to **justify** every refusal, because a long list of reasons invites people to argue. Thank the person, say no clearly, and offer something else only if you **genuinely** want to. At work, you can ask your manager which task is the **priority**. Then your manager has to make the choice.

Refusals work differently around the world, so it helps to **adapt**. Notice how people say no in a new place, and learn to hear the quiet no as well as the loud one.

## Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

*Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.*

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **insist** | **ritual** | **blunt** | **overestimate** | **harmony** | **justify** | **trail off** | **resent** | **adapt** | **literally** |
| **boundary** | **decline** | **genuinely** | **vague** | | | | | | |

**1.** Many workers _____ having to answer emails on the weekend.
**2.** She had to _____ the invitation because she was traveling that week.
**3.** People often _____ how long a short trip will take and arrive too early.
**4.** I asked for honest feedback, but I did not expect him to be so _____.
**5.** The village is known for the _____ between its different communities.
**6.** He started to explain, but his voice began to _____ when he saw her face.
**7.** Her answer was so _____ that I still do not know if she is coming.
**8.** "Make yourself at home" is not meant _____; please do not move the furniture.
**9.** Our hosts always _____ on cooking for us when we visit.
**10.** Drinking tea together after lunch is a daily _____ in our office.
**11.** If friends keep calling late at night, you may need to set a clear _____.
**12.** It is hard to _____ such an expensive phone when the old one still works.
**13.** I am _____ sorry that I cannot come; I really wanted to be there.
**14.** Most animals can _____ to small changes in the weather.

## Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

### Part A. Collocations

*Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1.** politely decline | _____ | **a.** a new culture |
| **2.** a blunt | _____ | **b.** priority |
| **3.** live in | _____ | **c.** paying |
| **4.** have a vague | _____ | **d.** refusal |
| **5.** insist on | _____ | **e.** an invitation |
| **6.** set clear | _____ | **f.** harmony |
| **7.** a top | _____ | **g.** boundaries |
| **8.** adapt to | _____ | **h.** idea |

*Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.*

### Part B. Word families

*Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.*

**1.** Saying yes to everything can lead to a lot of _____. (*resent*)
**2.** There is no _____ for being so rude to the waiter. (*justify*)
**3.** Her offer to help was _____, not just polite. (*genuinely*)
**4.** Learning a new language requires a lot of _____ to new ways of thinking. (*adapt*)
**5.** Please _____ these tasks so that we do the most important ones first. (*priority*)
**6.** His _____ that we stay for dinner made it hard to leave. (*insist*)

## Comprehension Questions

*Answer in full sentences.*

**1.** Why does the person in the opening story agree to the dinner, and how do they feel later?

2. What did the studies find about people who decline invitations?
3. Why do people who ask strangers for small favors often get more yes answers than they expect?
4. How is a direct no often seen in the Netherlands and Germany?
5. Give two examples from the reading of indirect ways to refuse.
6. In taarof, what are the guest and the host expected to do when more food is offered?
7. Why might a long list of reasons make a refusal harder, not easier?
8. What can you do at work when your manager asks you to take on more than you can handle?
9. The writer suggests waiting an hour before replying to an invitation. Do you think this would help you? Why or why not?
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"In the studies on declining invitations, most people who were invited to weddings decided to decline."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that a direct no is the best way to refuse in every culture."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer describe taarof in Iran and gift customs in China? Is it (a) to show that a first no is sometimes part of a polite custom, (b) to warn readers not to visit these countries, or (c) to prove that people there never mean what they say?

## True or False

*Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.*

1. In the opening, the person really wanted to go to the dinner. **T / F**
2. People who decline invitations often expect the inviter to be more upset than they really are. **T / F**
3. The studies on declining invitations were mainly about weddings. **T / F**
4. People who ask strangers for favors usually get more yes answers than they expect. **T / F**
5. In the Netherlands and Germany, a direct no is usually seen as very rude. **T / F**
6. A Japanese speaker may refuse by leaving a sentence unfinished. **T / F**
7. In taarof, a guest should accept more food the first time it is offered. **T / F**
8. In China, a gift is often refused two or three times before it is accepted. **T / F**
9. The writer says you should always give a long list of reasons when you refuse. **T / F**
10. At work, asking which task is the priority can help you refuse. **T / F**

## Language Focus: Have To and Don't Have To

**have to** + base verb = it is necessary (a rule or the situation makes it necessary).
**don't have to** + base verb = it is not necessary; you can choose.
**From the reading:**
"You **don't have to** justify every refusal, because a long list of reasons invites people to argue."
"Then your manager **has to** make the choice."
**Tip:** *don't have to* is not the same as *mustn't*. *You don't have to come* = it is your choice. *You mustn't come* = you are not allowed to come.

### Part A. Sentence starters

*Finish each sentence so that it is true for you.*

**have to (necessary)**

1. At work or school, I have to _____
2. When guests visit my home, I have to _____
3. Before an important exam or meeting, I have to _____

**don't have to (not necessary)**

4. On weekends, I don't have to _____

5. When I eat with close friends, I don't have to _____

### Part B. Questions

*Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to answer using* have to *or* don't have to. *Then ask a partner.*

6. What rules do you have to follow at your school or workplace?
7. What is one thing you are glad you no longer have to do?
8. In your country, what does a guest have to do when visiting someone's home?
9. What is something people think is necessary, but really is not?
10. If a friend invites you to a party, do you have to give a reason when you refuse?

## Discussion Questions

*Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.*

1. Is it easy for you to say no to friends? What about family members?
2. What kinds of requests do you find hardest to refuse?
3. Have you ever been hurt when someone turned down your invitation? Looking back, was it reasonable?
4. Do you prefer people to refuse you directly or indirectly? Why?
5. How do people in your family show that they do not want more food?
6. Have you ever misunderstood a refusal, or had your own refusal misunderstood?
7. Is refusing by text message easier or harder than refusing face to face?
8. Do you think it is rude to cancel a plan at the last minute? Are there acceptable reasons?
9. Is a vague answer such as "maybe" kinder than a clear no, or just confusing?
10. How can students or junior workers say no to a teacher or a boss without damaging the relationship?
11. Some people say yes to almost everything. What are the costs of this habit for them and for others?
12. Should international companies have one clear rule for how to refuse, or should they respect local styles?
13. Is honesty always more important than politeness? Can you think of a case where it is not?
14. As people work and study more across cultures, will ways of saying no become more similar around the world?

## Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/art-of-saying-no** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.