The Art of Saying No

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Sections follow the student handout. Delete a section here when you delete it from the handout. The handout uses the short (quick) version of the reading.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

1. resent
2. decline
3. overestimate
4. blunt
5. harmony
6. trail off
7. vague
8. literally
9. insist
10. ritual
11. boundary
12. justify
13. genuinely
14. adapt

Word Partners

Part A. 1 e 2 d 3 f 4 h 5 c 6 g 7 b 8 a

Phrases: politely decline an invitation; a blunt refusal; live in harmony; have a vague idea; insist on paying; set clear boundaries; a top priority; adapt to a new culture.

Part B. 1 resentment 2 justification 3 genuine 4 adaptation 5 prioritize / prioritise 6 insistence

Comprehension Questions: Model Answers

1. *Why does the person in the opening story agree to the dinner, and how do they feel later?*
It feels easier to say yes than to refuse. Later they start to resent the dinner, because they wanted a quiet evening at home.

2. *What did the studies find about people who decline invitations?*
People who decline tend to overestimate how upset the inviter will be. The inviters thought more about the reasons and were less upset than expected.

3. *Why do people who ask strangers for small favors often get more yes answers than they expect?*
Saying no feels uncomfortable, so many people agree instead of refusing.

4. *How is a direct no often seen in the Netherlands and Germany?*
It is often seen as honest rather than blunt or rude.

5. *Give two examples from the reading of indirect ways to refuse.*
Any two: letting a sentence trail off ("Sunday is a little..."); saying "I'll see what I can do" and then giving vague updates; refusing a gift or more food as part of a ritual.

6. *In taarof, what are the guest and the host expected to do when more food is offered?*
The guest is expected to say no, and the host is expected to insist, often about three times, before both know whether the offer is serious.

7. *Why might a long list of reasons make a refusal harder, not easier?*
Each reason can be solved, so the other person may argue. One honest sentence is usually enough.

8. *What can you do at work when your manager asks you to take on more than you can handle?*
Ask which task is the priority, for example: "I can take this on, but I'd have to put another task on hold. Which matters more?" Then the manager has to choose.

9. *The writer suggests waiting an hour before replying to an invitation. Do you think this would help you? Why or why not?*
Open answer. A strong answer says whether waiting would change the person's answer and gives a

reason, such as having time to think about what they really want.

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.*
    Not Given. The reading says the studies looked at everyday events, not weddings, and gives no information about wedding invitations.
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.*
    No. The writer says a polite no depends on where you are and that the most useful skill is the ability to adapt.
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?*
    (a) To show that a first no is sometimes part of a polite custom and is not meant to be taken literally.

True or False

1. **F.** They had been looking forward to a quiet evening at home.
2. **T.** They tend to overestimate how upset the inviter will feel.
3. **F.** They looked at everyday events, not weddings.
4. **T.** Saying no feels uncomfortable, so many people agree.
5. **F.** It is often seen as honest rather than blunt.
6. **T.** "Sunday is a little..." lets the sentence trail off.
7. **F.** The guest is expected to say no, and the host insists, often about three times.
8. **T.** The reading describes this polite custom.
9. **F.** You don't have to justify every refusal; a long list can invite argument.
10. **T.** Your manager then has to make the choice with real information.

Language Focus: Have To and Don't Have To

Model answers. Accept any answer that uses the form correctly and makes sense.

1. At work or school, I have to answer emails within a day.
2. When guests visit my home, I have to clean the kitchen first.
3. Before an important exam or meeting, I have to get a good night of sleep.
4. On weekends, I don't have to get up early.
5. When I eat with close friends, I don't have to worry about table manners.
6. We have to wear a name badge and arrive by nine.
7. I am glad I don't have to take the bus for two hours anymore.
8. A guest usually has to take off their shoes at the door.
9. You don't have to answer every message right away.
10. No, I don't have to give a reason. A short, polite no is enough.

Accept he/she/it has to and doesn't have to, and past forms (had to, didn't have to) where the meaning is past.

Notes on the Evidence

Declining invitations: Julian Givi and Colleen P. Kirk, "Saying No: The Negative Ramifications From Invitation Declines Are Less Severe Than We Think," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (press coverage from December 2023; PsyPost summary September 2024). Five studies, including 406 participants in hypothetical scenarios and 208 couples recalling real invitations. Invitees overestimated the inviter's negative reactions and the harm to the relationship; inviters focused more on the reasons. Limits noted by the authors: small, everyday events only, and a fixed reason for declining. The APA press release is dated December 2023 and press coverage continued into 2024; the exact journal issue was not confirmed, so the

reading gives no year.

Favors: Flynn and Lake, "If You Need Help, Just Ask," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (2008). Participants overestimated by about 50 percent the number of people they would need to ask before someone agreed; the authors link this to the social discomfort of saying no (Stanford GSB summary).

Cultural examples are tendencies from intercultural guides, not research findings, and the reading labels them as broad tendencies. Netherlands and Germany as direct: Erin Meyer, The Culture Map (2014), as summarized by Rework (this is about feedback and disagreement, so the reading attributes it to "business writers"). Japanese indirect refusals and the "Sunday is a little..." pattern: CARLA, University of Minnesota, Japanese refusals page. India: The Cultural Atlas (business culture page) says a polite refusal is often "I'll see what I can do," with vague follow-up updates meaning no.

Taarof: Wikipedia (Taarof) describes offers being refused about three times before both sides know whether the offer is sincere, and taxi drivers or shopkeepers declining payment as a courtesy; it also notes that taarof is weaker between close friends and in modern city shops. China: The Cultural Atlas (Chinese etiquette) says a gift may be declined two or three times out of politeness before it is accepted.

Practical advice in paragraphs 5 and 6 (keep the refusal short, buy time, thank and offer a real alternative, ask a manager to choose priorities) is common guidance from psychologists and workplace writers, not a single study. A small study by Patrick and Hagtvedt (Journal of Consumer Research, 2012) on saying "I don't" rather than "I can't" was considered but not used, because it concerns resisting temptation, not refusing other people.