

Saying Sorry and Accepting Apologies Beyond Basic Chinese

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Simple Apologies

对不起

(duì bù qǐ)

sorry

对不起 literally means “sorry”. It’s a formal and straightforward way to admit you made a mistake and apologize for it. It’s definitely an essential word to know.

e.g.

对不起, 我帮不了你。(Duìbùqǐ, wǒ bāng bù liǎo nǐ.)

Sorry, I can't help you.

对不起, 我迟到了。(Duìbùqǐ, wǒ chídào le.)

Sorry, I'm late.

不好意思

(bù hǎo yìsi)

Sorry; Excuse me

不好意思 is used as a less serious way to say “sorry” in Chinese. It’s actually often used in situations where you feel a bit embarrassed.

e.g.

A: 我喜欢你! (Wǒ xǐhuān nǐ!)

I like you!

B: 不好意思, 我有男朋友了。(Bù hǎo yìsi, wǒ yǒu nán péngyǒule.)

Sorry, I have a boyfriend already.

In fact, it can also mean “excuse me”, especially when you are bothering someone or trying to get their attention.

e.g.

不好意思, 请让一下。(Bù hǎo yìsi, qǐng ràng yíxià.)

Excuse me, would you mind stepping aside?

抱歉

(bàoqiàn)

to feel sorry

When you feel guilty about something, you can use 抱歉.

e.g.

A:你还没来吗? (Nǐ hái méi lái ma?)

Are you not coming yet?

B:抱歉, 我今天不能来了。(Bàoqiàn, wǒ jīn tiān bù néng lái le.)

Sorry, I can't come today.

This expression is used in particular when you feel sorry about something that happened to someone, and you want to express your sympathy.

e.g.

对于你离婚的事, 我感到很抱歉。(Duìyú nǐ líhūn de shì, wǒ gǎndào hěn bàoqiàn.)

I'm sorry about your divorce.

Specific Apologies

我不是故意的。

(Wǒ bùshì gùyì de.)

I didn't mean it.

When you accidentally do something wrong or hurt someone's feelings, you can use this phrase to explain yourself and say that you didn't mean any harm.

你别生气。

(Nǐ bié shēngqì.)

Don't be angry.

You can use this expression when someone is pissed off and you want to calm them down a bit.

是我不对。

(Shì wǒ bùduì.)

My bad.

是我不好。

(Shì wǒ bùhǎo.)

My bad.

是我的问题。

(Shì wǒ de wèntí.)
It's my problem.

我错了。

(Wǒ cuò le.)
My fault.

These phrases are used to apologize as well as admit it's your fault. For the first three, you can also add 这 or 都 in the beginning to say "This is my fault" or "It's all my fault".

e.g.

嘲笑你, 这是我不对。 (Cháoxiào nǐ, zhè shì wǒ bùduì.)
I didn't mean to make fun of you, it's my bad., this is my bad.

这次比赛输了, 都是我的问题。 (Zhè cì bǐsài shūle, dōu shì wǒ de wèntí.)
We lost the competition. It's all my fault.

下次不会这样了。 (Xià cì bù huì zhèyàngle.)
It won't happen again!

我不会再这样了。 (Wǒ bù huì zài zhèyàngle.)
I won't do it again.

When you try to apologize, you can also promise to do better in the future with these two expressions.

Accepting an apology

Being able to graciously accept an apology is just as important as being able to say you're sorry when you do something wrong. Now that we've learned how to apologize in Chinese, let's take a look at how to respond when someone says sorry to you.

没关系

(méi guān xi)

It's okay.

e.g.

A: 抱歉, 我今天不能来了。(Bàoqiàn, wǒ jīn tiān bù néng lái le.)

Sorry, I can't come today.

B: 没关系。(méi guān xi)

It's okay.

没事儿

(méi shìr)

It's nothing.

e.g.

A: 不好意思, 我不是故意的。(Bù hǎo yìsi, wǒ bùshì gùyì de.)

Sorry, I didn't mean it.

B: 没事儿。(méi shìr)

It's nothing.

别放在心上

(Bié fàng zài xīn shàng.)

Never mind.

e.g.

A: 很抱歉, 都是我的错。(Hěn bàoqiàn, dōu shì wǒ de cuò.)

I'm sorry, it's all my fault.

B: 别放在心上。(Bié fàng zài xīn shàng.)

Never mind.

小事儿, 别担心

(Xiǎo shìr, bié dānxīn.)

It's nothing. Don't worry about it.

e.g.

A: 对不起, 我迟到了。(Duìbùqǐ, wǒ chídào le.)

Sorry, I'm late.

B: 小事儿, 别担心。(Xiǎo shìr, bié dānxīn.)

It's nothing. Don't worry about it.

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