

Saying 'no' to Invitations in American English: Basic Strategies

A. Read the following dialogue:

Phil: *Do you wanna see a movie tomorrow?*

Chris: *Uhm... I'd like to. Sorry, but I have to study for an exam tomorrow.*

Chris and Phil are classmates. This example shows what they **generally** do to say 'no' politely in English.

B. Read the different parts of Chris's response and circle what he did to say 'no' politely to Phil.

1. When Chris says "**Uhm...**", he:

a. gives an excuse	c. says he feels bad
b. hesitates	d. gives a positive opinion

2. When Chris says "**I'd like to**", he:

a. gives an excuse	c. says he feels bad
b. hesitates	d. gives a positive opinion

3. When Chris says "**Sorry**", he:

a. gives an excuse	c. says he feels bad
b. hesitates	d. gives a positive opinion

4. When Chris says "**but I have to study for an exam tomorrow**", he:

a. gives an excuse	c. says he feels bad
b. hesitates	d. gives a positive opinion

C. Look at Chris's response again.

Chris: *Uhm... I'd like to. Sorry, but I have to study for an exam tomorrow.*

Note the sequence of phrases he uses in his response and complete the following statement about how Americans **generally** say 'no' politely.

First, Americans _____; second, they _____; third, they _____; and then, they _____.

D. Read this dialogue between two friends. Sarah is inviting Mary to go the movies with her. Pay attention to Mary's response to the invitation.

Sarah: *Hey Mary, what are you doing now? Do you want to come see a movie with me?*

Mary: *Uhh, you know, actually I have to do some laundry.*

Put a check mark (✓) next to the things Mary did in her response. Write down the exact part of her response that goes with it on the line provided.

_____ hesitates: _____

_____ gives an excuse: _____

_____ says she's sorry: _____

_____ gives a positive opinion: _____

Here are some strategies we normally use to say 'no' politely in American English:

Hesitate/ Use pause fillers: To show we are not ready to accept the invitation. We use these to show that we're thinking about what to say.

<i>Mmm... uhm... well... you know... Oh...</i>
<i>Gee, I don't know...</i>
<i>I'm not sure.</i>
<i>I don't think I can.</i>

Mary's "*Uhm... you know, actually*" shows this.

Apologize/ Give a positive opinion: To show that we feel bad about the situation:

At the beginning of the refusal	At the end of the refusal
<i>Sorry...</i>	<i>Sorry about that.</i>
<i>I'm sorry to say that...</i>	<i>I'm (really) sorry.</i>
<i>I wish I could, but...</i>	<i>I hope you're not disappointed</i>
<i>I really wanted to, but...</i>	<i>I hope you have fun</i>

Give an excuse/ explanation: Americans usually expect some kind of explanation, specific reasons for saying no to their invitation.

I have a headache.
My friend is coming over tonight.
I have an exam tomorrow. I have to study.

Adapted from: Silva, A. J. B. D. (2003). The effect of instruction on pragmatic development: Teaching polite refusals in English. *Second Language Studies*, 22(1), 55-106.