

THE
ULTIMATE GUIDE
to saying

No

*19 word-for-word scripts to help you say
no with grace and compassion.*

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SAYING

No

“People think focus means saying yes to the thing you’ve got to focus on. **But that’s not what it means at all.** It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I’m actually as proud of the things we haven’t done as the things I have done. **Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things.**”

— STEVE JOBS

Whether you strive to avoid conflict, appearing rude, burning bridges or missing that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity...

Saying “no” to others isn’t always easy.

But it’s a message that can be delivered with love and compassion. In fact, start thinking about it this way:

Saying no is an act of kindness.

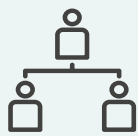
It’s an act of kindness to yourself, as well as the people around you.

Think about it. Do you want to go out for coffee with a mentor who’s stretched to the max and resentful? Do you want your star employee to stay silent if she’s drowning under too many projects?

Of course not. You want the people you care about to be happy and sane! Those people must also include you. Saying no doesn't limit your opportunities either — it opens you up to the right ones.

Challenge yourself to reframe “no” into an act of kindness. Here are 19 word-for-word scripts that can help. Read ‘em all or jump straight to the scenario you need now.

JUMP TO
HOW TO SAY NO TO...



YOUR BOSS



A FRIEND



“CAN I PICK
YOUR BRAIN?”



CLIENTS &
CUSTOMERS



COLLABORATORS



EVERYONE ELSE

READ THIS FIRST

Of course, it's not just about the words you use, but how you say them. If you want to say no with grace and compassion, keep these tips in mind:

BE QUICK

Saying no doesn't get easier if you wait. Respond as quickly as makes sense — it's a sign of respect and gives you peace of mind.

BE POLITE

Thank them for thinking of you and, if appropriate, congratulate them.

DON'T LIE

Whatever you say, be truthful. If you can't be completely honest, then don't say anything besides a kind "no."

DON'T APOLOGIZE

You can say that you're sorry to miss the event or program, but don't apologize for saying no. You haven't done anything wrong.

GIVE A REASON

Research shows that the word "because" makes people more likely to do something. It softens the blow and provides context. Just don't let it become a back and forth as they try to convince or invalidate your why (you'll know the people and situations where a simple "no" is best).

GIVE AN ALTERNATIVE

If you can't attend the bake sale, ask how else you can contribute. If you can't do lunch, can you squeeze in a phone call? This isn't required, but it's a nice way to be there for someone without having to "be there."

And remember... These scripts are here to help you learn how to say no with kindness. But don't feel stifled by the phrasing as they're just starter suggestions. Feel free to swap out words so it feels natural and appropriate given the context and specifics of your situation.

HOW TO SAY NO TO

Your Boss

There are two reasons you might need to say no to your boss. Here's how to do both right.

REASON #1: YOU DON'T HAVE THE TIME.

If you genuinely don't have the bandwidth to take on another project, try this:

"I hear how important this is. Can we take a look at my current priorities together? Because there's a lot in motion right now and I want everything to be done right. So I'll either have to press pause on other projects, or we'll need to find someone else to take this on."

Why it works: The question, "Can we look at my priorities?" shows that you're on top of things. It also reminds your boss that there are consequences to shifting your focus.

REASON #2: YOU DON'T AGREE WITH THE REQUEST.

If you've been asked to take on a project that you don't agree with — whether in its objective or scope — reframe your response to something like:

"I don't think we should move ahead with this strategy, but I do have another idea that might work way better to help our customers _____ (explain desired end result). Are you open to another perspective?"

Why it works: Instead of simply disagreeing, propose an alternative. This proves you're invested in the outcome and committed to helping the team get there.

HOW TO SAY NO TO

Your Friend

When it comes to your friends, the biggest “no” generator usually involves a favor. Here are two different ways to approach this type of request:

APPROACH #1: YOU HAVE A RULE.

If someone asks for a favor that could potentially backfire — whether it’s letting them drive your expensive car or risking a valuable relationship — here’s what you can say:

“Our friendship is important to me. As a rule, I don’t _____.”

Why it works: Once you complete this sentence with their big ask (i.e. “loan money to friends” or “introduce friends to clients”) it becomes super clear that you’re not singling them out as unreliable.

APPROACH #2: YOU’RE ALREADY OVERSTRETCHED AND OVERCOMMITTED.

If you’ve ever been asked to babysit, move boxes or contribute to a bake sale, you can say:

“I have to pass on this one. I’ve been burning the candle at both ends and promised myself I wouldn’t take on one more commitment until I had a chance to rest and get my energy back on track.”

Why it works: It’s simple, truthful and clear.

HOW TO SAY NO TO PEOPLE WHO

Want to Pick Your Brain

To be clear, I'm all for being generous and sharing your knowledge to help others get ahead. Heck, I've been sharing my best free advice for nearly two decades through our [newsletter](#), [show](#), [podcast](#) and social channels.

That said, when you earn a living from your knowledge, it's important to set boundaries that honor your time and energy. My friend Todd Herman has a great analogy about "brain pickers" that can help shift your mindset about giving advice.

He says: "Would you ever walk into a store, grab a bunch of clothes off the rack and walk out without paying? Of course not. That would be stealing. So 'brainpicker' don't expect to walk into my head, grab everything you want and walk out without paying."

If you find yourself stretched to the max with offering free advice, here are two ways to redirect "brain picker" requests into something more efficient and rewarding for both of you:

REDIRECT #1: ASK WHAT THEY REALLY WANT.

People usually want to pick your brain because they need something. You can save time and still be helpful by simply asking what they want.

"My work schedule is full, so _____ (breakfast/lunch/coffee) is not doable these days. Are you interested in becoming a client or do you just have a quick question?"

Why it works: This reply forces them get clear about what they want from you. If they're interested in becoming a customer, you can direct them to your sales material. If they have a question, this gently reminds them to be mindful of your time.

REDIRECT #2: SEND THEM TO YOUR PRODUCTS OR SERVICES.

Here's classy way to steer freebie-seekers toward your paid offerings:

"I'm not available for coffee, but you should really consider getting my _____ (product, training, program). It's all of my best thinking in one place and I created it specifically to help people in your situation."

If you don't have a product or program, try this:

"I don't have time to grab coffee unless we're doing it as an official business meeting. If you're game, my charge for a consultation is \$XX."

Why it works: By gently guiding people to your products or services, you're reminding them that this is your job and not a hobby. If you get a lot of brain picking requests, it might be time to consider turning your previously free advice into a new revenue stream.

REDIRECT #3: SEND THEM TO YOUR FREE BLOG POSTS, VIDEOS OR ARTICLES.

If you've been sharing free content online, direct them to it:

"I don't have time to grab coffee, but here are a few of my blog posts that address this exact topic."

Why it works: You're setting a clear boundary around your time and helping them get the answers they need. Win-win.

HOW TO SAY NO TO

Clients and Customers

Sometimes clients ask for things that you can't, won't or don't have time to do. Here's how to say no in each scenario:

SCENARIO #1: THEIR REQUEST IS NOT IN YOUR WHEELHOUSE.

Are you a photographer who's been asked to plan the wedding? A designer asked to write website copy? Try this:

"This is a great idea, but I have to pass because my skills aren't a good match for what you want on this project."

Get specific here or be prepared elaborate because you'll likely get some push back.

Another way to approach this situation is to refer your client to someone who can help. For example:

"This is a great idea, but I have to pass because the project falls outside of my expertise. What you need is a person who does X. Here are a few referrals to get you started: _____."

Why it works: Referrals are an amazing way to support your client, grow your network and keep everyone working in their zone of genius.

SCENARIO #2: YOUR SCHEDULE IS FULL.

If taking on even one more project is gonna put you on the fast train to Burnout City, just say no. And this:

“I have to pass because my schedule is completely full right now and I wouldn’t be able to give your project the attention it deserves.”

Why it works: By calling out your inability to “do a good job” you’re showing how much care you put into each project.

SCENARIO #3: THEIR REQUEST IS OUTSIDE YOUR ORIGINAL PROJECT SCOPE.

If you get a request that’s not a definite “no” but will require more money to inspire a “yes,” try this:

“I’m excited that you’re so happy with the work we’re doing together! Our current arrangement is for _____ (specific project deliverable) for a rate of _____ (agreed rate). Based on what you’re saying, you want to add _____ (new request). I can do that for _____ (new cost). If that’s outside your budget, we can just stick to the original terms.”

Why it works: “Scope creep” happens to nearly every service provider on the planet. But if you bring up the original agreement, you’re reminding them that anything extra will cost extra. Just make sure to be crystal clear what you need from them to make it happen so they can make a smart choice in either direction.

HOW TO SAY NO TO REQUESTS FOR

Collaboration or Promotion

The only time you should ever promote something is because you genuinely believe in it. Trust from your audience takes a long time to build, so never recommend products out of loyalty, obligation or guilt.

If someone asks you to promote their work or collaborate, but you're just not interested, here are two ironclad reasons you can use:

REASON #1: YOU DIDN'T SEEK IT OUT YOURSELF.

You can use this script to decline the request, while still cheering them on:

"Thanks for thinking of me. It sounds like a fantastic _____, and I'll be cheering you on, but I'm not able to promote. I have a policy not to promote things unless I seek them out myself or if I've seen results first hand. Congratulations again and I wish you tremendous success with _____!"

Why it works: Citing a personal policy shows that it's not about them, it's about protecting the trust you've built with your audience.

REASON #2: YOU NEED TO FOCUS ON YOUR OWN PROJECTS.

If the collaboration request doesn't fit into your schedule or align with your goals, say this:

"Thanks for thinking of me for your _____. It sounds fantastic and I'll be cheering you on, but I'm not able to accept the invitation. I'm currently focused on my own projects and am not taking on any collaborations unless I seek them out directly. Congratulations again and I wish you tremendous success with _____!"

Why it works: It's honest and relatable while still providing heartfelt encouragement.

HOW TO SAY NO TO

Everyone Else

Here are some simple ways to say no to everyone else — even if it’s your mom’s 17th suggestion that you’d “really hit it off” with her friend’s son who just moved to town.

YOU'RE TOO BUSY.

“Thanks for thinking of me for _____ but I’m not able to accept given my other commitments.”

YOU HAVE A COUNTEROFFER.

“Thank you for thinking of me for _____. While I’m not able to _____, I would be able to _____.”

YOU'RE NOT INTERESTED.

“Thank you for thinking of me but I’m going to pass on this.”

“Thank you for your kind offer. While it’s not something I choose to pursue, please know how honored I am to be asked.”*

* This script is from our friend Bob Burg, co-author of *The Go-Giver*

BUT WHAT IF...

...THEY TRY TO NEGOTIATE

“I’d just rather not, but thank you so much for thinking of me.”

...IT’S A UNIVERSAL NO

“Thank you for reaching out but I’m not taking any _____ at this time.”

Use this for meetings, interviews, investment opportunities, new clients, etc.

...YOU CAN’T REPLY INDIVIDUALLY, BUT YOU DON’T WANT BLOW PEOPLE OFF

Use an email autoreply with one of the scripts above. This allows you to honor someone’s inquiry without spending a ton of time responding to emails. The best part is that if you see a request later that’s actually a yes, you can always change your mind. (Who doesn’t love a general no that becomes a personalized yes?)

This is a great option to use during busy times or seasonal work (think: CPAs, florists, launches, etc.). In fact, here’s one I’ve used:

Hello :)
I’m writing a book and launching our [flagship program B-School](#), which means I’m full.
If I’m not expecting a note from you, please resend your message to info@marieforleo.com and my team will respond as soon as they can.
Thanks!
Marie

You could have someone do it for you, like a personal assistant or customer service team. The same rules apply, just don’t have them pretend to be you. Establish rules and criteria for each type of request, then let your team use their own voice to decline on your behalf. Remember, just because they’re not coming from you doesn’t mean they should lose that personal touch!

So there you have it, The Ultimate Guide To Saying No.

Do you see how the word “No” doesn’t have to be rude?
It’s both a kind and expansive act — for you and others.

Want More? Watch These

MARIETV EPISODES

Be sure to watch (or rewatch!) these episodes
for how to say no with kindness and love:

How To Back Out Gracefully: The Art Of Saying No After You’ve Said Yes

How To Say No To Promoting Others With Honesty & Class

How To Be Direct with a Business Partner or Friend

How to Set Boundaries: Exactly What to Say to Late & No Show Customers

Decision Detox: How Making Less Choices Gives You More Freedom