

LINGUA AGENTS
Lesson Summary
POLITE LANGUAGE



The Five Tools

Tool	Use it for	Example
could + please	polite requests	Could you send me the report, please?
would like	polite preferences and orders	I would like to schedule a meeting.
excuse me	getting someone's attention	Excuse me, could you help me for a moment?
I'm afraid / unfortunately	softening bad news	I'm afraid I can't attend on Thursday.
do you know...?	indirect questions	Do you know where the meeting room is?
I think / why don't we	giving advice politely	Why don't we start with the main agenda?

Polite Requests: could vs can, would like vs want

Direct (acceptable but blunt)	Polite (professional)
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Can you help me?	Could you help me for a moment, please?
I want a glass of water.	I would like a glass of water.
I want to speak to Peter.	I would like to speak to Peter.
Send me the report.	Could you send me the report, please?

Note: 'could' and 'would like' are not more correct than 'can' and 'want'. They are more appropriate in professional contexts. In informal situations with friends, 'can' and 'want' are perfectly natural.

Indirect Questions

To form an indirect question, add 'Do you know...' at the start and change the word order to statement order (subject + verb, not verb + subject).

Direct question	Indirect question
Where is the bathroom?	Do you know where the bathroom is?
Where is Mark?	Do you know where Mark is?
When will the report be ready?	Do you know when the report will be ready?
Who is responsible for this?	Do you know who is responsible for this?

Key point: in an indirect question, the word order after 'do you know' is the same as a statement, not a question. 'Do you know where the bathroom IS?' not 'Do you know where IS the bathroom?'

Giving Advice Politely

Direct (can sound bossy)	I think... (softer)	Why don't we... (collaborative)
We should start the meeting.	I think we should start the meeting.	Why don't we start the meeting?
We should take a break.	I think we should take a break.	Why don't we take a break?
We should call the supplier.	I think we should call the supplier.	Why don't we call the supplier?

Common Confusions

sorry vs excuse me

Use 'excuse me' to get someone's attention politely, for example approaching a waiter, a receptionist, or a stranger. Use 'sorry' when you have done something wrong or inconvenienced someone. Saying 'sorry' to a waiter to get their attention is understood but sounds slightly awkward in a professional context.

I'm afraid vs unfortunately

Both soften bad news. 'I'm afraid' tends to feel slightly warmer and more personal. 'Unfortunately' is slightly more formal and neutral. Either works in most professional situations. 'I'm afraid I can't make it'

sounds empathetic. 'Unfortunately I have another commitment' sounds factual and professional. Both are correct and both are better than giving the bad news without a softener.

indirect question word order

The most common error is keeping question word order after 'do you know': 'Do you know where IS the bathroom?' is wrong. After 'do you know', use statement word order: 'Do you know where the bathroom IS?' The subject comes before the verb, just as in a normal sentence.

Self-Check

Cover the page and answer these from memory.

1. How do you ask a receptionist for help politely? Use excuse me, could, and please.
2. Soften this bad news: 'I cannot come to the meeting.' Use I'm afraid.
3. Make this indirect: 'Where is the IT department?'
4. You want to suggest a coffee break to your team. Give two polite ways to say it.
5. What is wrong with this sentence? 'Do you know where is the bathroom?'

Answers: 1. Excuse me, could you help me for a moment, please? 2. I'm afraid I cannot come to the meeting. 3. Do you know where the IT department is? 4. Why don't we take a coffee break? / I think we should take a coffee break. 5. Wrong word order: should be 'Do you know where the bathroom is?'