

The Art of 'No'

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Advice



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By Robin Bernstein March 19, 2017

Early in my career, I struggled to say no. I was asked to serve on committee after committee, to evaluate fistfuls of manuscripts and grants, and to perform dozens of other tasks, large and small. I said yes willy-nilly — often because of genuine interest, but other times out of a sense of guilt or obligation, and sometimes out of fear of reprisal if I refused.

But as I advanced in my career, the requests snowballed. Agreeing to do all of them — or even half of them — became impossible. I needed to figure out when to say no, and how to do it artfully. Five principles have helped me learn what to say, and what not to say.

Volunteer someone else — strategically. Often when people ask you to do something, they don't actually need *you* to do it. They just need the task done. Even more urgently, they need to complete the task of obtaining a commitment from someone to do it. At the moment of the "ask," they likely do not view you as the holder of unique talents or the only person who could possibly do this work. More likely, they see you as a potential checked box on their own to-do list.

In such cases, you may encounter surprisingly little resistance if you politely decline while nominating a substitute. The requester will likely thank you and move on to the person you suggest. And if you respond promptly, you'll be appreciated all the more.

Be strategic in naming your replacement(s). If the proposed gig is desirable, suggest someone who could use a career boost. Pay special attention to issues of gender, race, and position: Consider passing a good opportunity on to a person of color, a person without a tenure-track job, or someone else who faces documented disadvantages in academe. If the proposed labor is undesirable, nominate someone competent but underutilized. Be sure only to suggest someone you respect and trust to complete the task reasonably well.

- *Don't say:* "Um, OK, sure," and then kick yourself later.
- *Instead, say:* "Thank you for inviting me to present on your conference panel. I'm honored that you thought of me for this interesting and important conversation. To my regret, I'm unable to attend. However, I know that [graduate student] is working on this exact topic, and I think she'd welcome an opportunity to put her work in dialogue with yours. Her email is name@school.edu. If you contact her, please feel welcome to use my name." Note: This wording expresses sincere regret for the missed opportunity but does not apologize for saying no.
- *Or:* "I received your invitation to review 'Boring Manuscript' for *Obscure Journal*. Unfortunately, I have too many reviewing tasks on my plate right now, and I'm unable to add this one. Professor So-and-So at X University has published on this topic, and would be an ideal reviewer for this manuscript."

Don't explain. Maybe you have a good reason for saying no. Maybe you don't. Either way, if you try to justify your answer, you open yourself to judgment and bargaining, or you risk oversharing. You don't have to defend your decision.

- *Don't say:* "I wish I could attend this event, but I need to drive my aunt to the doctor on that day." The event could shift to a different day — and now you're on record stating that you want to attend. Or the asker could judge your personal life, or question your commitment to the profession.
- *Instead, say:* "Thank you for this invitation. Unfortunately, I'm unavailable to participate. I appreciate your thinking of me."
- *Or:* "I received your invitation to participate in [event]. I have a previous commitment at that time, but I wish you the very best for a successful event." No one needs to know that you previously committed to going home, watching *Project Runway*, and eating Funyuns.

Do explain. When you have an unassailable reason that will stop the conversation in its tracks, you may choose to volunteer it. If you want a person never to contact you again, you may say so. And again, don't apologize or bargain.

- *Don't say:* "I'm so sorry, but I just can't do what you're asking of me. I promise I'll do more to pull my weight next month."
- *Instead, say:* "I teach from 9 a.m. through 3 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so I'm never available during those times."
- *Or:* "I have no expertise in your journal's subject area or discipline. I will never be an appropriate person to review a manuscript for your journal. Please do not contact me again. Thank you."

Set your own policies. Create guidelines to help you decide when to say no. These policies can be publicly stated ("I never write a recommendation with less than two weeks' notice") or privately avowed.

For example, every year, I commit to 12 external-review projects (evaluating article manuscripts, book manuscripts, grant applications, or tenure-and-promotion dossiers). That number doesn't include reading work by my students, mentees, or friends. After I've said yes to 12, I say no to all further requests. When I say no, I usually offer no

explanation because the purpose of the policy is not to justify my decision to anyone else but instead to provide me with an internal compass. My guidelines help me know when to say no — and when to say yes.

A friend of mine agrees to review an article manuscript only if it sounds so interesting that she would drop everything to read it immediately. Another friend meets with students during regular business hours only. One colleague travels for work only five times a year. I don't publish any work that is "for hire," meaning that the author doesn't retain the copyright.

Your department chair, dissertation director, or principal investigator can help you set your policies — and then you can use that person as backup when necessary. For example, you can decide with your chair how many committees you should sit on. Once you and your chair reach that agreement — preferably in writing — you have a basis on which to decline all additional committee requests.

- *Don't say (even to yourself):* "How many committees am I serving on? I don't know. I guess one more can't hurt."
- *Instead, say:* "Thank you for inviting me to serve on this committee. My chair and I have decided that I have reached my maximum allotment of committee work this year, so I need to decline your request. If you wish to discuss this matter further, I'll be happy to bring my chair into the loop."

Just hit "delete." Some requests are unreasonable or inappropriate, and they issue from people who have no power over you. Here are some examples of real requests that I have deleted (all are from people with whom I've had no previous contact):

- "Greetings! I hope you are doing well. Attached please find my paper titled 'Subject Only Tenuously Connected to Your Field.' I look forward to your and your colleagues' comments on the paper."
- "Hi Ms. Burnstein. I am an eighth grader at [school]. I am writing a report on [vague topic]. Please send me some sources and also when you are available for me to interview you?"
- "I want to pursue a Ph.D. at your university. Please send me information about how I can apply and also what different programs you offer."

In such instances, you are under no obligation to engage. Your silence is your reply.

- *Don't say:* "Here is a long explanation for why your request is inappropriate."
- *Instead, say:* (silence).

Academe could not function if every scholar refused to serve on committees, evaluate manuscripts and grants, write recommendations, and perform many other uncompensated and often undervalued tasks. We need to say yes — and to do so often. Ultimately, that's why saying no is so important. Saying no to some requests enables us to say yes to others. Each productive yes depends on many an artful no.

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