POLYGLOT HOUSE • POLYGLOT ENGLISH

How to Make Requests in English

Could, would, do you mind — the polite request ladder

EPISODE 18 • LEVEL B1–B2

Episode summary

- Politeness in English is distance, not begging: “please” does not fix a direct order. You step back so the other person has room to say yes.
- The five-rung request ladder: “Can you” (friends, small things) → “Could you” (the everyday workhorse) → “Would you” (service tone) → “Would you mind” + verb-ing (big asks) → “I was wondering if you could” (bosses, strangers, big favors).
- The famous trap: “Would you mind opening the window?” — “No, not at all” means YES, you will open it. “Yes, I mind” means no. Permission twin: “Do you mind if I” (you do it yourself), “Would you mind if I opened” (past tense).
- Saying yes like a native: “Of course, right away” beats a flat “yeah.” Refusing through the middle door: “I wish I could, but…” plus a counter-offer — “I cannot do X, but I can do Y.”
- Work requests need a softener (“when you have a moment”, “at your convenience”), a reason, and one rung more politeness in writing. The thank you closes the loop: ask well, answer well, refuse well, thank well.

What’s inside this PDF
20 key words • the request ladder chart • Say It Better upgrades • 3 practice exercises

Key Vocabulary

20 words from this episode — learn them, then use them this week

1. request
when you ask someone to do something for you.
> She made a polite request for help.

2. polite
kind, respectful, and well-mannered in how you speak.
> A polite request gets a faster yes.

3. permission
the right to do something, given by someone else.
> He asked for permission to leave early.

4. favor
a kind act you ask someone to do for you.
> Could I ask you a small favor?

5. refuse
to say no to a request.
> She refused politely, so nobody was upset.

6. appreciate
to feel thankful and to show it.
> I really appreciate your help.

7. ladder
in this episode: five steps from casual to very polite requests.
> Climb the request ladder as the favor gets bigger.

8. softener
a small phrase that makes a request gentler.
> “When you have a moment” is a useful softener.

9. counter-offer
offering something else when you refuse.
> I cannot do X, but I can do Y — that is a counter-offer.

10. deadline
the time by which something must be done.
> I would love to help, but I am on a deadline.

11. upside down
in this episode: answers where “no” means yes.
> The upside-down answer: “No, not at all.”

12. stranger
a person you do not know.
> “Excuse me” opens requests to strangers.

13. distant
in this episode: giving the other person room in your words.
> Politeness is distance, not begging.

14. tone
the feeling in your voice — friendly, rude, cold, warm.
> English hears tone first and words second.

15. frame
a fixed sentence pattern you reuse.
> The rung-five frame: “I was wondering if you could.”

16. urgent
needing action right now.
> Sorry, this is urgent — could you call me back today?

17. convenience
a time that suits the other person.
> “At your convenience” is the formal softener.

18. begging
asking again and again in a desperate way.
> “Please, please help me” is begging, not politeness.

19. grateful
feeling or showing thanks.
> “I would be grateful if you could” is the written workhorse.

20. loop
in this episode: the request cycle, closed with thanks.
> The thank you closes the loop.

The Request Ladder

five rungs, one upside-down answer, honest refusals

Can you → Could you → Would you → Would you mind → I was wondering
“Can you pass the salt” for friends; “Could you send me that file” for everything; “Would you mind helping me” for big asks; “I was wondering if you could” for the biggest.

“No, not at all” means yes
The upside-down answer to “Would you mind.” Accept with “No, not at all”; refuse with “Actually, I do mind.”

“Do you mind if I” = permission for yourself
“Do you mind if I open the window” — you are the one doing it. “Would you mind if I opened” is the more polite twin.

Yes well, refuse well
“Of course, right away” beats “yeah.” Refuse with “I wish I could, but” plus a counter-offer.

Work requests: softener + reason
“Could you send me the report when you have a moment” — the deadline is implied, the pressure is gone.

Say It Better — 10 upgrades

☐ “Give me water.”	☐ “Could I have some water, please?”
☐ “Open the window.”	☐ “Would you mind opening the window?”
☐ “You help me?”	☐ “Could you help me with this?”
☐ Answering “Yes” to “Would you mind?”	☐ “No, not at all.” (No means yes.)
☐ “I cannot do it.”	☐ “I wish I could, but I have a meeting.”
☐ “Send me the report.”	☐ “Could you send me the report when you have a moment?”
☐ “Please, please help me.”	☐ “I was wondering if you could help me. I would really appreciate it.”
☐ “You, where is the station?”	☐ “Excuse me. Could you tell me how to get to the station?”
☐ “Yeah.” (flat yes)	☐ “Of course, right away.”
☐ “No.” (naked refusal)	☐ “I wish I could, but I am on a deadline. How about Friday?”

Practice Time

3 exercises — do them today, not “someday”

Exercise 1 — Fill in the blank

Word bank: request • permission • favor • refuse • appreciate

1. A _____ is when you ask someone to do something for you.
2. “Do you mind if I open the window” asks for _____.
3. Could I ask you a small _____?
4. She _____d politely, so nobody was upset.
5. The magic word at the end of every request: I really _____ it.

Exercise 2 — Climb the ladder

Make each request one rung more polite (answers below):

1. “Pass me the salt.” > A friend, one rung up:
2. “Open the window.” > A stranger, very polite:
3. “Help me move this box.” > A neighbor, the biggest favor frame:

Exercise 3 — The upside-down drill

A partner asks “Would you mind” five times. Answer three with “No, not at all” and refuse two politely with “I wish I could, but” plus a counter-offer. Say the answers out loud — your mouth must learn that no means yes.

- Would you mind closing the door?
- Would you mind lending me your pen?
- Would you mind helping me this weekend?

Answer key

Ex 1: 1 request • 2 permission • 3 favor • 4 refused • 5 appreciate

Ex 2: 1 “Can you pass me the salt, please?” 2 “Would you mind opening the window?” 3 “I was wondering if you could help me move this box when you have a moment.”