The 5 R’s of an apology

John Kador says an authentic apology should have these five elements:

1. First, an apology offers **recognition**. The injured party needs to know that the offender understands specifically what he or she did wrong.
   
   *I recognize that my lies have messed up our friendship and that you do not trust me anymore.*

2. Second, it offers **responsibility**. The offender must accept personal responsibility for the injury.
   
   *I accept total responsibility for repeatedly lying to you.*

3. Third, it offers **remorse**. There is no substitute for the magic words “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.” It’s probably wise to keep this part short and direct. It’s tempting to add words of explanation. Resist the impulse.
   
   *I am so sorry.*

4. Fourth, it offers **restitution**. Whenever possible, the apology should try to make the injured party whole and include a promise to never offend again. A good way to end this part of the apology is to ask, “What else can I do?”
   
   *I hope you accept this check for my carelessness. I wish I could as easily repair the damage to our friendship. What else can I do?*

5. Fifth, it offers a promise not to repeat the offensive behavior.

A bad or late apology is worse than no apology at all. There is no substitute for the timely phrases, “I apologize” and “I am sorry.”
Analyze these recent public apologies by some famous people:

“I am deeply sorry I did not live up to what was expected of me. To every New Yorker and to all those who believed in what I tried to stand for, I sincerely apologize.”
-- former New York Gov. Elliot Spitzer, at a press conference March 12, 2008

“For any harm or hurt that this hot-mic private conversation may have caused, I apologize. My support for Sen. Obama’s campaign is wide, deep and unequivocal. I cherish this redemptive and historical moment.”
-- the Rev. Jesse Jackson, in a written statement July 9, 2008, after crude remarks he made about then-presidential candidate Barack Obama were made public

“I have no confusion whatsoever. I was out of order beyond belief. I was way out of order. I acted like a punk. I regret that, and there is nobody that has heard that tape that is hit harder by it than me. I make no excuses for it, it is inexcusable, and I hope that is absolutely clear.”
-- actor Christian Bale, apologizing on a L.A. morning radio show Feb. 6 for his screaming tirade on the set of “Terminator Salvation”

“Clearly, everybody knows I got a DUI. That’s unacceptable. That is 100 percent my fault. I let my family down, clearly. I let TNT down, clearly. I let T-Mobile down, clearly. But also I let the NBA family down. … All I can say is that it will never happen again, and I’m sorry. That’s all I can say. … I screwed up. I made a mistake. I’m sorry, and I apologize.”
-- retired NBA player and TNT sports commentator Charles Barkley, Feb. 20

“I told a joke that was beyond flawed, and my intent is completely meaningless compared to the perception. … It’s not your fault that it was misunderstood. It’s my fault that it was misunderstood. So I would like to apologize, especially to the two daughters involved, Bristol and Willow, and also to the governor and her family and everybody else who was outraged by the joke. I’m sorry about it, and I’ll try to do better in the future.”
-- late-night talk show host David Letterman, on his show June 15
Bad Apology: Eight Ways to Screw up an Apology

1. Faux Apology
“I’m sorry if you were offended” is not an apology. The phrase blames the victim. It redoubles the offense by accusing the victim of being over-sensitive. Formulations of the faux apology are common in politics: “The president regrets any hurt feelings his statements have caused.”

2. Intention Apology
“I want to apologize” may sound like an apology, but is no more about actually apologizing than “I want to lose weight” is about actually losing weight.

3. Indirect Apology
“On behalf of _____, let me apologize.” This is cowardly and lazy. It satisfies no one. If you’re going to apologize, do so on behalf of the only person talking . . . you.

4. The Passive Voice Apology
*I’m sorry I hit you*” is an apology. “*I’m sorry you were hit*” is not. Again, politicians are masters of this formulation: “*There should not have been any physical contact in this incident. I am sorry that this misunderstanding happened at all, and I regret its escalation and I apologize.*”

5. Lame Excuse Apology
Making lame excuses is self-serving. No one cares about your problems or your excuses, least of all the person you are apologizing to. This is not about you.

6. Passing-the-Buck Apology
Blaming someone else is the lowest form of excuse-making. Either you accept responsibility, or you don’t.
7. Citing Company Policy Apology

“Sorry, it’s company policy” is a total cop-out. Company policy is made for companies, not customers. The policy is your problem. Don’t make it the victim’s.

8. The “Sorry about that” Apology

That kind of informality really conveys an attitude of “Oops, that’s too bad, dude! Do I look like I care?” The phrase, “Sorry about that” diminishes both the victim and the apologist.