

# KIND PASSWORDS, OR Well, Excuse Me!

To help retrain students after a long and brutal summer, I like to use kind and polite expressions as passwords until they start to understand that we deal with one another courteously in our class. Each of these could conceivably be translated as “**Excuse me**” in English but there are subtle differences that students should know.

**¿Mande?** “Command [me].” This is a polite expression to use when you do not understand what someone has said—sort of like “**I beg your pardon?**” in English. It is often used when dealing with elders or authorities. This is much more polite than saying “¿Qué?” (What?), which would be something like grunting “Huh?” in English speaking cultures. This expression is common in Mexico. In some Spanish speaking countries, this phrase is considered over-the-top polite, but many Mexicans relish being proper and courteous, so you will often hear it, and it is appropriate in Spanish class.

**Disculpe.** “Forgive [me].” This can be used to **get attention** from a clerk or waiter (or a classmate or a teacher!). It is sort of like “Pardon me” but not in the sense of “forgive me” as if you have done something wrong.

**Con permiso.** “With permission.” This is “excuse me” as an expression of courtesy that is said when someone wants to get by someone or **pass through a group** of people. Use it when you have not yet done something wrong, but do not want to accidentally bump into someone. It is often shortened to a simple “**Permiso.**” This term is also used to excuse oneself from a meal, or to respectfully ask permission to enter a room.

**Lo siento.** “I’m sorry.” This is a **general expression for “excuse me”** in the sense of “I’m sorry.” It comes from the verb sentir (to feel), and means, “I feel [sorry or bad about] it.” Use this one when you want to acknowledge you feel bad for having committed **a minor wrong**. A silly mnemonic trick to remember this one is thinking that when you are sorry you feel a bit bad or low, so: “I feel low; so low I see into your toe,” or briefly: “Low see in toe”, which sounds something like **Lo siento**. I train students to say this when they arrive late to class.

**Perdón.** “Pardon.” This is a multi-purpose expression for a faux pas. Similar to “Lo siento,” you can use it to **ask forgiveness for a relatively insignificant mistake** and want to ask forgiveness—like slightly bumping into someone or interrupting a conversation. Also **Perdóname**.

**Discúlpame.** “Forgive me.” Use this expression when you realize you have done **something very wrong**—like bumping into someone forcefully and causing them to drop something. From the verb disculpar, which is related to the English words culpable and culprit. **Discúlpame** is something like “make me not culpable” or “make me not guilty.” It is **Discúlpame** in the tú form.

After teaching these expressions have a few good-natured and funny students act them out for the amusement of the group creating scenarios and using the proper terms. Then set up a class activity where everyone is milling about the classroom talking, asking what was said, interrupting, squeezing past one another and bumping into each other. This is an opportunity to use each of these useful sayings repeatedly as they wander around the room and....

- **Politely ask what someone said**
- **Try to get one another’s attention**
- **Squeeze through a group**
- **Commit minor wrongs**
- **Bump into one another or interrupt a conversation**
- **Commit greater mistakes** (be careful here).