

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

Perdón. “Pardon.” This is a multi-purpose expression. Use it to ask for forgiveness after you have made a minor mistake and want to apologize—like lightly bumping into someone or interrupting a conversation. Also **Perdóname.**

Disculpeme. “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, so **Disculpeme** is something like “make me not culpable” or “make me not guilty.” It is **Disculpame** 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 and then set up a class activity where everyone is milling about the classroom talking, squeezing past one another, and bumping into each other as an opportunity to use each of these useful sayings repeatedly as they:

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