

NEWS LESSON

Who Is an Apology Really For?

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you go to a school reunion if none of your friends were going?
2. What would surprise your old classmates most about you now?
3. Is it easier to say sorry in person or in a message?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**conscience**	☐	A	the ability to understand how another person feels
2	**subsequently**	☐	B	a person you compete against
3	**adolescent**	☐	C	the inner feeling that tells you if your actions are right or wrong
4	**outsider**	☐	D	afterwards, at a later time
5	**empathy**	☐	E	change yourself so much that you seem a different person
6	**wronged**	☐	F	treated unfairly
7	**rival**	☐	G	to do with the years between being a child and being an adult
8	**reinvent**	☐	H	a person who does not belong to a group

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Mike went back to his school reunion to apologise to a friend he had failed to defend. The conversation did not go the way he planned.

1 Mike had spent twenty years thinking about the classmate he had failed to defend. Now the Melbourne firefighter was going back to school to apologise. He had not joined in the homophobic bullying, but he had stayed silent. At the reunion, he hoped to put that right.

2 His account, published by the Guardian in October 2026, illustrates how unpredictable such encounters can be. Mike did find the former friend and apologise, but the exchange took an uncomfortable turn. The man who had experienced the bullying ended up comforting the person who had failed to defend him. Mike subsequently recognised that his attempt to clear his conscience had inadvertently placed another burden on someone already wronged. The pair nevertheless caught up over drinks, suggesting that imperfect conversations can still open a door.

3 School reunions are uniquely capable of collapsing time. Adults who have built careers, families and independent identities may walk into a familiar room and immediately feel fifteen again. A nickname, a particular laugh or the sight of a former rival can bring back insecurities that seemed long settled. Unlike an ordinary gathering, a reunion comes with a ready-made social hierarchy, one that participants may have spent years escaping. Even those who arrive feeling self-assured can find themselves measuring their present lives against adolescent expectations.

4 Yet reunions can also undermine the stories we have told ourselves about other people. The supposedly destined high achiever may have changed direction entirely; the quiet outsider may have developed an extraordinary life. Former classmates who barely exchanged a word might discover unexpected common ground, now that they no longer need to perform for a teenage audience. In that sense, returning to school can be an exercise in empathy: the people frozen in our memories have continued to grow, struggle and reinvent themselves out of sight.

5 Social media adds another layer of complexity. We may think we know what became of classmates because we have glimpsed their promotions, weddings and holidays online. But an edited feed is not the same as a sustained conversation, and envy can flourish when we compare our untidy private lives with someone else's carefully polished public image. A reunion offers the possibility of a more honest encounter, although that depends on whether people are prepared to drop the performance. The temptation to keep score does not necessarily disappear when the school uniform comes off.

6 Mike's story raises a particularly delicate issue: can an apology help heal a past injury, or does it sometimes serve primarily the person offering it? Intentions matter, but so does the effect on the person listening. Anyone turning up at a reunion hoping to put things right might first consider whether an old classmate wants that conversation at all. The most valuable outcome may be neither forgiveness nor renewed friendship, but a more generous understanding of who everyone has become.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. Mike's apology ended up adding to the difficulties of the person he was apologising to. T F NG
2. According to the article, the most valuable result of a reunion is a renewed friendship. T F NG
3. Mike's old classmates knew about his plan to apologise before the reunion. T F NG
4. The article suggests that classmates can bond as adults partly because they no longer feel pressure to impress each other. T F NG
5. The article argues that social media gives people a more honest picture of their classmates than a reunion can. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

destined	envy	hierarchy	inadvertently	polished	self-assured	sustained	temptation

1. In his rush, the technician _____ switched off the power to the whole street.
2. The new recruit was so _____ that she corrected the director in her first meeting.
3. Everyone assumed the child prodigy was _____ for greatness, but she chose to become a vet.
4. The _____ advert, with its flawless lighting, hid the fact that the product was quite ordinary.
5. Real progress in a language requires _____ effort over many months, not a single burst of study.
6. Her _____ at her sister's success showed in the way she avoided mentioning it.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. He was _____ about where he had been that night, and the officer grew suspicious. (EVADE)
2. Years of public _____ had left the minister deeply distrustful of journalists. (SCRUTINISE)
3. It is _____ to expect everyone to forgive after a single apology. (REALISTIC)
4. The two sisters finally achieved a _____ after a decade of silence. (RECONCILE)
5. Critics condemned the _____ of the company's safety checks. (ADEQUATE)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Many phrasal verbs are idiomatic, so the meaning cannot be guessed from the parts. Notice the particle that follows the gap, such as over, up to or on, and learn the pattern with it.

dwelling	gloss	owned	patch	shrug	tone	wipe

1. Mutual friends helped the brothers _____ up their quarrel after ten years.
2. The company's annual report tends to _____ over its failings, mentioning them only in passing.
3. After weeks of denial, the manager finally _____ up to the error.
4. There is little point in _____ on a mistake that cannot be undone.
5. Stung by the criticism, she tried to _____ it off as a joke.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What makes an apology feel sincere?
2. Would you rather catch up with an old friend or meet someone new?
3. Should people be allowed to leave their school reputation behind?

9 Role-play: should I go to the reunion?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the person who wants to go

A reunion for your old school class is next month. You want to go and say sorry to a classmate you did not help at school. Explain why it matters to you. Listen to your friend and decide what to do.

Student B · the friend

You think it may be a bad idea. The other person might not want to talk about the past, and a party is not the right place. Ask questions and suggest another way to say sorry.

Useful phrases

I've been thinking about it for years.

I'd like to say sorry to him in person.

What if he doesn't want to talk about it?

That's a fair point, but I can't stay silent.

Maybe a message would be easier for him.

Let's agree that I'll ask him first.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you decide to apologise at the reunion, and how?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 C · 2 D · 3 G · 4 H · 5 A · 6 F · 7 B · 8 E

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 inadvertently · 2 self-assured · 3 destined · 4 polished · 5 sustained · 6 envy

6 Word forms

1 evasive · 2 scrutiny · 3 unrealistic · 4 reconciliation · 5 inadequacy

7 Language focus

1 patch · 2 gloss · 3 owned · 4 dwelling · 5 shrug

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