



# The Power of the Boo-Boo

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Admitting to Making a Mistake

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Nobody's perfect. So, in English, what's the best way to admit to having made a mistake? You could apologize and **bluntly** say 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake', or 'I screwed up', or 'I **dropped a clanger**', or any number of interesting synonyms.

But if your mistake is a relatively minor one, there's nothing to match the power of the phrase 'I made a **boo-boo**'.

Words like 'boo-boo', which are made up of sounds that repeat, involve a process called reduplication. This repetition of sounds seems to be a primitive human impulse that begins with baby talk and in several cases, like 'boo-boo', **persist** into adulthood.

Boo-boo is a charming synonym for 'mistake' that can provoke a bit more **sympathy** in the listener (think infant apologizing to parent).

'I'm so sorry Tom, I made a bit of a BOO-BOO this morning: I accidentally erased your hard disk. It's all good though, we have a cloud backup.'

There are three types of reduplicative in English:

1. Repeating reduplicatives (aye-aye, bang-bang, ha ha)
2. Rhyming reduplicatives (boogie-woogie, mumbo jumbo, okey-dokey)
3. Vowel change reduplicatives (chit-chat, hip-hop, tick-tock)

## Test your reduplicatives!

Here are some common repeating reduplicatives – do you know what they all mean?

aye-aye, beriberi, cancan, chacha, chin-chin, choo-choo, chop-chop, din-din, goody-goody, ho ho, hush-hush, murmur, Never-Never Land, nighty-nighty, no-no, to pooh-pooh, so-so, twenty-twenty, yum yum

The solutions are on page 34.

Some years ago, *The Guardian* newspaper printed a story about a man who tripped over his shoelace in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Falling down some steps, he knocked over three priceless Qing Dynasty vases, which fell to the ground and broke into more than 400 pieces. He was sitting there in shock when museum staff arrived. Everyone stood around in silence – only the man kept pointing to his shoelaces, saying, 'There it is! That's what made me fall!'

Man has been blaming others at least since Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. Somewhat later, Aaron blamed all the sins of Israel on a harmless goat and sent the poor animal – the 'escaped goat' or 'scapegoat' – off into the wilderness.

Roman emperors liked to kill messengers who brought bad news, and in the Middle Ages

a prince would often be given a 'whipping boy' – an unlucky servant who could be beaten whenever his master had misbehaved.

We may shake our heads at the blame-passers of history, but in the heat of the moment, when hammer hits finger or phone battery dies, how many of us spontaneously accept responsibility?

Maybe it's human nature to find a whipping boy when things go wrong. Before you go, though, consider the old saying: 'He who points the finger of blame at another does well to remember that the three fingers point back at himself.' A nice reminder to admit 'I made a boo-boo.'

Paul Smith

P.S. If you have any comments or questions about this article, just drop me a line at: [paul@smith.de](mailto:paul@smith.de). I'm always happy to hear from you.

## Vocabulary Trainer

• <b>bluntly</b>	direkt/unverblümt
• <b>to drop a clanger</b>	ins Fettnäpfchen treten
• <b>boo-boo</b>	Fehler/Schnitzer
• <b>to persist</b>	fortbestehen
• <b>sympathy</b>	Mitleid/Mitgefühl