Modal Verbs for Obligation, Prohibition and Permission — B1

CEFR Level B1 | 3 Worksheets: The Obligation System • Past, Permission and Reporting • Reading and Writing | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: The Obligation System

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B1 (CEFR)

Reference: Strength and Source

Two questions decide which form you need: **how strong** is the obligation, and **who says so**?

Form	Strength	Source	Example
must	Strong	The speaker, or a written rule	You **must** submit the form by Friday.
have to	Strong	Someone or something outside	I **have to** renew my visa every year.
have got to	Strong (informal)	Outside; very common in speech	I've **got to** go — I'm late.
need to	Medium-strong	Practical necessity	You **need to** book in advance.
should / ought to	Weak — advice	The speaker's opinion	You **should** apologise to her.
had better	Advice + warning	Speaker; a bad result is implied	You'd **better** leave now, or you'll miss it.
mustn't	Prohibition	A rule — no choice	You **mustn't** share your password.
don't have to	No obligation	Free choice — the opposite of mustn't	You **don't have to** come if you're busy.
needn't	No obligation (formal)	Same as don't have to	You **needn't** wait for me.

Had better is stronger than should. It always implies a consequence: "You'd better study" = …or you will fail.

Exercise A: Rank by Strength

Put these in order from STRONGEST obligation (1) to WEAKEST (6).

Rank	Sentence
____	a. You could apply for the grant.
____	b. You must apply for the grant.
____	c. You should apply for the grant.
____	d. You'd better apply for the grant.
____	e. You might want to apply for the grant.
____	f. You need to apply for the grant.

Exercise B: Complete the Sentences

#	Sentence
1	Visitors _____ report to reception before entering the building. (rule on a sign)
2	You _____ take an umbrella — it's not going to rain. (not necessary)
3	You _____ tell anyone about this. It's confidential. (forbidden)
4	I _____ go — my train leaves in ten minutes. (informal, urgent)
5	You _____ see a doctor about that cough. (advice)

#	Sentence
6	We _____ hurry, or we'll miss the start. (advice + warning)
7	Applicants _____ provide two references. (formal requirement)
8	You _____ pay now — you can pay when you collect it. (not necessary)

Exercise C: Error Analysis

Correct the error and explain the rule.

1. "You mustn't bring a gift — but you can if you want to."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
2. "Do you must work on Saturdays?"
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
3. "Last year I must renew my passport."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
4. "You had better to call her tonight."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
5. "He must to leave early today."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Past, Permission and Reporting

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B1 (CEFR)

Part A – Obligation in the Past

Must has no past form. Each meaning takes a different past.

Present	Past	Meaning
must / have to	**had to**	It was necessary — and I did it.
mustn't	**wasn't allowed to / couldn't**	It was forbidden.
don't have to	**didn't have to**	It wasn't necessary.
should	**should have + pp**	It was a good idea — but I didn't do it.
can (permission)	**was/were allowed to**	It was permitted.

Watch the trap: "I didn't have to pay" = it wasn't necessary. "I couldn't pay" = it wasn't possible. Different meanings!

Rewrite each sentence in the past.

1. "I must wear a suit to work." → Last year, _____
2. "Students mustn't use dictionaries in the exam." → Yesterday, _____
3. "We don't have to pay for parking." → Last week, _____
4. "You should tell her the truth." → (but you didn't) _____
5. "Children can play in the garden." → When I was young, _____

Part B – Permission: Asking and Giving

Politeness changes the form. All of these ask the same thing — but not in the same voice.

Form	Register	Example
Can I…?	Neutral, everyday	**Can I** borrow your pen?
Could I…?	More polite	**Could I** ask you something?
May I…?	Formal	**May I** come in?
Would you mind if I…?	Very polite; note the past tense	**Would you mind if I** opened the window?
Am I allowed to…?	Asking about a rule	**Am I allowed to** park here?

Choose a suitable form for each situation. There is more than one good answer — but the register must fit.

#	Situation	Your question
1	Asking your best friend for a lift home	_____
2	Asking a judge to approach the bench	_____
3	Asking your manager for Friday off	_____
4	Asking a stranger if you can sit down	_____
5	Asking if photography is permitted in a museum	_____

Part C – Reporting Rules

Report each rule using the verb in brackets. Change the modal as needed.

1. "You must wear a helmet at all times." *(The instructor told us…)*

   → _____

2. "You mustn't feed the animals." *(The sign says…)*

   → _____

3. "You don't have to book a table." *(The waiter said…)*

   → _____

4. "You should arrive fifteen minutes early." *(They advised us…)*

   → _____

5. "You can't take photographs in this room." *(The guard explained…)*

   → _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Reading and Writing

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B1 (CEFR)

Part A – Reading

Read the text and answer the questions.

> *When Priya started at the hospital, the rules surprised her. She had to arrive twenty minutes before her shift — unpaid — to read the handover notes. She wasn't allowed to keep her phone in her pocket, though she didn't have to leave it in a locker; a drawer was enough. Staff mustn't discuss patients outside the ward, and Priya thinks that rule is right. But she also thinks the hospital should pay for those twenty minutes, and that someone should have raised it years ago. "You'd better not complain in your first month," a colleague told her. Priya doesn't have to stay, of course. She could leave. But she needs the work.*

1. Find **seven** obligation, prohibition or permission structures in the text. List them.

   _____

   _____

2. What is the difference between "wasn't allowed to keep her phone" and "didn't have to leave it in a locker"?

   _____

   _____

3. Priya thinks someone **should have raised** it years ago. Did anyone raise it? How do you know?

   _____

   _____

4. Why does the colleague say "You'd better not complain" rather than "You shouldn't complain"?

   _____

   _____

5. "Priya doesn't have to stay." Explain what this means, and why the writer chose it instead of "Priya can't stay".

   _____

   _____

Part B – Transformation

Rewrite each sentence using the word in brackets, keeping the same meaning.

1. "It isn't necessary for you to wait." *(NEED)*

   → _____

2. "Smoking is forbidden in all rooms." *(MUST)*

   → _____

3. "It would be a good idea to check the dates." *(OUGHT)*

   → _____

4. "I was obliged to work late last night." *(HAD)*

   → _____

5. "It isn't compulsory to attend the meeting." *(HAVE)*

   → _____

6. "If you don't leave now, you'll be late." *(BETTER)*

   → _____

Part C – Writing

Write **100–120 words** on ONE of the following. Use at least **SIX** different structures from Worksheets 1–2.

Topic A: The rules at your school or workplace. Which are necessary? Which should change?

Topic B: Write a short guide for a visitor to your country: what they must do, mustn't do, and don't have to worry about.

My topic: ___ A ___ B

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

_____
____

Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 6

Score: _____ / 30

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — B1 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Ranking)

1 = b (must) · **2 = f** (need to) · **3 = d** (had better) · **4 = c** (should) · **5 = a** (could) · **6 = e** (might want to)

Accept d and f in either order — "had better" is stronger than "should" but its force comes from the implied threat, not from institutional weight. Worth discussing.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Gap Fill)

#	Answer	Why
1	must / have to	A written rule on a sign.
2	don't have to / needn't	Not necessary — free choice.
3	mustn't	Confidential = forbidden.
4	've got to / have to	Informal and urgent — "got to" fits speech.
5	should / ought to	Advice, not a rule.
6	'd better	Advice with a consequence.
7	must / have to	A formal requirement.
8	don't have to / needn't	An alternative exists.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Errors)

#	Error	Correction & rule
1	mustn't bring a gift	**You don't have to bring a gift.** — The second clause ("but you can") proves it is optional, not forbidden. The single most common B1 error.
2	Do you must…?	**Do you have to work on Saturdays?** — "Have to" is an ordinary verb and takes do/does; "must" does not.
3	Last year I must renew	**Last year I had to renew my passport.** — Must has no past form.
4	had better to call	**You had better call her.** — "Had better" takes the bare infinitive: no "to".
5	must to leave	**He must leave early.** — No "to" after must.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Past)

#	Answer
1	Last year, I **had to wear** a suit to work.
2	Yesterday, students **weren't allowed to use** dictionaries in the exam.
3	Last week, we **didn't have to pay** for parking.
4	You **should have told** her the truth.
5	When I was young, children **were allowed to play** in the garden.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Permission)

#	Model answer	Why
1	Can you give me a lift home?	Neutral — "may" would sound absurd with a friend.
2	May I approach the bench, Your Honour?	The most formal context in English; "may" is near-obligatory.
3	Could I take Friday off, please?	Polite but not stiff — "could" is the workplace default.

#	Model answer	Why
4	Could I sit here? / Is this seat free?	Polite to a stranger; "can" is acceptable but blunter.
5	Am I allowed to take photographs? / Is photography permitted?	Asking about a rule, not asking the person — a different function.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Reporting)

#	Model answer
1	The instructor told us **we had to wear** a helmet at all times.
2	The sign says **you mustn't feed** the animals. / …that visitors **are not allowed to feed** them.
3	The waiter said **we didn't have to book** a table.
4	They advised us **to arrive** fifteen minutes early. / …that we **should arrive** early.
5	The guard explained that **we couldn't** / **weren't allowed to** take photographs.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Reading)

#	Answer
1	**had to arrive** · **wasn't allowed to keep** · **didn't have to leave** · **mustn't discuss** · **should pay** · **should have raised** · **'d better not complain** · **doesn't have to stay** · **could leave** · **needs the work**. Accept any seven.
2	"Wasn't allowed to keep her phone" = forbidden — she had no choice. "Didn't have to leave it in a locker" = not necessary — a drawer was an acceptable alternative. One removes choice; the other offers it. This is the mustn't / don't have to distinction in past form.
3	No — nobody raised it. "Should have + past participle" always means the thing did NOT happen. That is what distinguishes it from "should".
4	"You'd better not" carries an implied consequence — complain and something bad will follow (a reputation, a problem with the manager). "You shouldn't complain" is merely an opinion. The colleague is issuing a warning disguised as advice.
5	"Doesn't have to stay" = she is free to go; nothing compels her. "Can't stay" would mean she is unable or not permitted to — the opposite. The writer chooses it to set up the final line: she is theoretically free, but the freedom is unusable because she needs the work.

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Transformation)

#	Answer
1	You **needn't** wait. / You **don't need to** wait.
2	You **mustn't smoke** in any of the rooms.
3	You **ought to check** the dates.
4	I **had to work** late last night.
5	You **don't have to attend** the meeting.
6	You'**d better leave** now(, or you'll be late).

Marking Guide — Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures used accurately	0–5
Meaning	mustn't / don't have to used correctly; strength matches intent	0–4
Form	No "to" after must or had better; had to for the past; do/does with have to	0–3
Task	Within 100–120 words; coherent and relevant	0–3

Teacher Notes — Common B1 Problems

- **mustn't / don't have to** remains the core error, now appearing in longer texts where the context makes it more visible. Diagnose with a sorting task before teaching anything new.
- **The past is where the system fractures.** One present form (*must*) splits into three pasts: *had to*, *wasn't allowed to*, *should have*. Learners need a table, not a rule.
- **"Had better" is not "would be better".** It is grammatically odd (past form, present meaning, bare infinitive) and semantically threatening. Learners over-use it as polite advice, which sounds alarming to native speakers. Teach the implied "…or else".
- **Didn't have to vs couldn't.** "I didn't have to pay" (it wasn't necessary) vs "I couldn't pay" (it wasn't possible). Learners conflate them because both feel like "no + past obligation".
- **Permission is a register exercise, not a grammar one.** Can/could/may are all grammatical; choosing wrongly is a social error, not a linguistic one. Role-play beats gap-fill here.
- **Towards B2:** introduce *be supposed to*, *be required to*, and the fact that *should* also expresses expectation, not just advice.