Modal Verbs for Obligation, Prohibition and Permission — C1

CEFR Level C1 | 3 Worksheets: Source, Force and Ambiguity • Register, Power and Instruction • Drafting and Argument | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Deontic Modality — Source, Force and Ambiguity

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C1 (CEFR)*

Reference: The Deontic Inventory at C1

Obligation, prohibition and permission constitute **deontic** modality: modality concerned with what ought to be, rather than what is. At C1 the forms are known; the work lies in the distinctions the forms encode and the ambiguities they generate.

Form	Notes	Example
must (deontic)	Speaker-imposed; carries the speaker's own authority	You **must** stop doing that.
have to	Externally imposed; the speaker merely reports	I **have to** declare this on my tax return.
be to + inf	Institutional instruction; impersonal, unnegotiable	The committee **is to** reconvene in September.
be supposed to	Encodes a gap between rule and practice; attitudinal	We're **supposed to** minute every meeting.
be obliged / bound to	"Bound to" (deontic) = duty-bound; distinct from epistemic "bound to"	The trustee **is bound to** act in good faith.
shall (legal)	Imposes duty in statute and contract; not future	The Lessee **shall** keep the premises insured.
may / may not	Formal permission and prohibition	No person **may** enter without authorisation.
be entitled to	A *right* — the holder may waive it	Employees **are entitled to** representation.
ought to	Moral force; weaker than must, more principled than should	We **ought to** have told them sooner.
had better	Advice + implied adverse consequence	You'd **better** declare it.
needn't have + pp	Performed, but unnecessary	You **needn't have** apologised.
didn't have to + inf	Unnecessary; usually not performed	I **didn't have to** apologise, so I didn't.

Exercise A: Deontic or Epistemic?

Deontic and epistemic modality share their forms. Context alone disambiguates — and sometimes fails to.

For each sentence, identify the reading(s) available. Where both are possible, explain what would force each one.

1. "She should be at the office by now."
   Reading(s): _____
   Disambiguating context: _____
2. "You must be very careful with that."
   Reading(s): _____
   Disambiguating context: _____
3. "He can't be serious."
   Reading(s): _____
   Disambiguating context: _____
4. "The report is to be submitted on Friday."
   Reading(s): _____

Disambiguating context: _____

5. "They must have known about the defect."
   Reading(s): _____
   Disambiguating context: _____
6. "You may leave at four."
   Reading(s): _____
   Disambiguating context: _____

Exercise B: Complete the Sentences

Complete each gap with a form appropriate to the register indicated.

#	Sentence
1	Under clause 7, the Contractor _____ indemnify the Client against all such claims. (contract)
2	You _____ have gone to all that trouble — the meeting was cancelled at nine. (but you did)
3	Directors _____ to act in the best interests of the company. (formal duty)
4	We're _____ to circulate the agenda a week in advance; in practice it arrives the night before.
5	Candidates _____ not confer during the examination. (formal prohibition)
6	Tenants _____ to four weeks' notice under the terms of the agreement. (a right)
7	All staff _____ to attend the briefing at nine sharp. (institutional instruction)
8	I _____ have said anything, but somebody had to. (regret + concession)

Exercise C: Error Analysis

Correct the error and explain the rule violated.

1. "You needn't have reminded me, so I forgot entirely."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
2. "The tenant shall to maintain the property in good repair."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
3. "We are supposed to have finished by now, and we did."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
4. "She wasn't obliged to resign, so she was forced out."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
5. "Employees are entitled to take a break, so they must take one."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Register, Power and the Grammar of Instruction

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C1 (CEFR)*

Part A – Who Is Doing the Obliging?

Every deontic utterance answers an unasked question: on whose authority? Advanced writers select forms that either foreground or conceal that authority.

Instruction: the reader is to stop copying the whole department into routine emails.

Render the instruction for each context. Do not repeat a structure. Note in each case where the authority is located.

1. A peer, in a private message

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

2. A line manager, in a one-to-one

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

3. A written policy on the intranet

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

4. A passive-aggressive all-staff email

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

5. A formal warning on file

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

6. A style guide for the organisation

   _____

   Authority located in: _____

Part B – The Agentless Obligation

English permits obligation to be imposed without naming anyone as its source. Passives (*is required*), impersonal subjects (*it is expected that*), nominalisation (*compliance is mandatory*) and deontic *shall* all delete the agent. This is a rhetorical resource — and a political one.

Rewrite each sentence to conceal the agent entirely. Then state what is gained and what is lost.

1. "I want you to submit these by Friday."
   Agentless version: _____
   Gained / lost: _____

2. "The board has decided that you cannot appeal."
   Agentless version: _____
   Gained / lost: _____

3. "We expect everyone to attend."
   Agentless version: _____
   Gained / lost: _____

4. "I am not going to let you take that leave."
   Agentless version: _____
   Gained / lost: _____

Part C – Analytical Reading

Read the passage and answer the questions.

> *The consultation document is a masterpiece of its kind. Residents are invited to comment; the council is not obliged to act on anything they say. Objections must be submitted in writing within twenty-one days, though the document nowhere states that they shall be read. Officers are to have regard to representations received — a phrase which, as any planner will tell you, means precisely nothing and cannot be challenged. Residents needn't worry, we are told. They are entitled to attend the hearing. They are not, however, entitled to speak at it, and they mustn't assume that attendance implies a right of reply. One is supposed to find this reassuring.*

1. Identify every deontic structure. Classify each as **obligation**, **prohibition**, **permission**, **right**, or **absence of obligation**.

_____

_____

2. The passage twice uses **are entitled to** — once affirmed, once negated. Analyse the rhetorical effect of the pairing.

_____

_____

3. **"Officers are to have regard to representations received"** — unpack this. Why *be to* rather than *must*? Why is it unchallengeable?

_____

_____

4. The writer says the council **is not obliged to** act rather than *need not* act. What is the difference in force?

_____

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5. **"Residents needn't worry"** — identify the register shift and the irony. Who is the implied speaker of that sentence?

_____

_____

6. The final sentence uses **one is supposed to**. Explain how "supposed to" carries the entire argument of the passage.

_____

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Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 3: Transformation, Drafting and Argument

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C1 (CEFR)*

Part A – Sentence Transformation

Rewrite using the word given, between three and six words, without changing the meaning.

1. "It was unnecessary for you to intervene, though I'm glad you did." *(NEEDN'T)*

   → _____

2. "There was no requirement for me to attend, so I stayed away." *(HAVE)*

   → _____

3. "The agreement compels the vendor to disclose all known defects." *(BOUND)*

   → _____

4. "Nobody compelled him to accept the terms." *(OBLIGED)*

   → _____

5. "The rule exists but is universally ignored." *(SUPPOSED)*

   → _____

6. "Staff have a right to refuse unsafe work." *(ENTITLED)*

   → _____

7. "It is prohibited for any person to remove documents from the archive." *(MAY)*

   → _____

8. "It would be prudent to seek advice before signing." *(OUGHT)*

   → _____

Part B – Drafting Under Constraint

Draft the following, each in **no more than 40 words**. The deontic force must be unambiguous, and the register must be exactly right for the reader.

1. A clause obliging a tenant to permit access for inspection, while preserving the tenant's right to notice.

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. A notice permitting photography for personal use only, prohibiting commercial use, and imposing no obligation to seek permission for the former.

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3. An email to a senior colleague declining an obligation you are not, in fact, under — without naming the obligation as illegitimate.

_____

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4. A policy sentence that appears to grant a right while imposing a condition that makes it unusable. Then annotate it: how does the grammar do the work?

_____

_____

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Part C – Extended Writing

Write **200–250 words** on ONE of the following. Use at least **six** distinct deontic structures (underline them). Register must be formal-academic and consistent.

Topic A: "The passive voice is the natural grammar of institutional power." Discuss with reference to obligation.

Topic B: "A rule that nobody is obliged to enforce is not a rule but a threat held in reserve." Evaluate.

Topic C: Rights are said to be stronger than permissions. Examine whether the grammar of English supports this claim.

My topic: ___ A ___ B ___ C

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Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 6

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C1 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Deontic or Epistemic?)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	She should be at the office by now.	**Both.** Epistemic: I deduce she has arrived. Deontic: she is required to be there. Intonation and context decide. "…so give her a ring" forces epistemic; "…and she knows it" forces deontic. The ambiguity is systematic and unresolvable in isolation.
2	You must be very careful.	**Deontic** — an instruction. The epistemic reading ("I deduce you are careful") is available grammatically but pragmatically odd with a second-person subject and a stative complement.
3	He can't be serious.	**Epistemic** — negative deduction. The deontic reading ("he is not permitted to be serious") is absurd, which is why the sentence is unambiguous despite sharing its form with prohibition.
4	The report is to be submitted on Friday.	**Deontic** — institutional instruction. "Be to" is almost exclusively deontic; the epistemic/narrative use ("she was to die that spring") requires a past frame.
5	They must have known.	**Epistemic** — deduction about the past. A deontic reading would require "must have known" to mean "were obliged to know", which English does not permit: *must have + pp* is epistemic only. Deontic past obligation is *had to*.
6	You may leave at four.	**Both.** Deontic: permission granted. Epistemic: it is possible you will leave. Stress disambiguates — deontic *may* is unstressed, epistemic *may* often carries stress or an adverb ("you may possibly leave").

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Gap Fill)

#	Answer	Why
1	shall	Legal *shall* imposes the duty. "Will" would be a prediction; "must" is unidiomatic in drafting.
2	needn't	The trouble was taken — hence the perfect.
3	are bound / are obliged	Deontic "bound to" = duty-bound. Note the contrast with epistemic "bound to" (= certain to).
4	supposed	The rule/practice gap is stated explicitly in the next clause.
5	may	Formal prohibition in exam regulations.
6	are entitled	A right, waivable by the holder.
7	are	"are to attend" — institutional instruction.
8	needn't / shouldn't	"Needn't have said" = I said it and it was unnecessary; the concession that follows supports this.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Errors)

#	Error	Correction & rule
1	needn't have reminded … so I forgot	**You didn't need to remind me…** — "Needn't have" entails the reminder WAS given; forgetting entirely contradicts it.
2	shall to maintain	**shall maintain** — *shall* is a modal and takes the bare infinitive.
3	supposed to have finished, and we did	**We were supposed to have finished by now, but we haven't.** — "Supposed to" implies non-fulfilment; "and we did" removes the reason for using it. Use "We have finished" or "We were required to finish, and we did."
4	wasn't obliged to resign, so she was forced out	**She wasn't obliged to resign, but she was forced out anyway.** — "So" asserts a consequence that contradicts the premise. Absence of obligation cannot cause coercion.
5	entitled to, so they must	**Employees are entitled to a break, but they aren't obliged to take one.** — An entitlement is a right, which the holder may waive. Deriving an obligation from it inverts the concept.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Six Registers)

Context	Model + where authority sits
Peer, private	"Any chance you could drop the department off these? My inbox is dying." — **No authority claimed.** Framed as a favour; the obligation is invisible.
Line manager, 1:1	"I'd like you to stop copying everyone in on routine mail." — **In the speaker.** "I'd like" is a soft performative that everyone understands as an instruction.
Intranet policy	"Routine correspondence should be sent only to named recipients." — **Nowhere.** Agentless passive; the rule appears to have written itself.
Passive-aggressive all-staff	"Colleagues are reminded that not everyone needs to be copied into every email." — **Concealed.** "Are reminded" implies the rule pre-exists and the offender knows it. The plural conceals the target.
Formal warning	"You are to cease copying department-wide distribution lists into routine correspondence with immediate effect." — **In the institution.** "Be to" is the grammar of the disciplinary process.
Style guide	"Emails shall be addressed to named recipients only." — **In the document itself.** Legal *shall* gives a style rule the costume of a statute.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (The Agentless Obligation)

#	Agentless version	Gained / lost
1	These are to be submitted by Friday. / Submission is required by Friday.	Gains: the deadline appears to originate in the task, not the speaker; it cannot be argued with, because there is nobody to argue with. Loses: the speaker's ability to make an exception, and any warmth.
2	No right of appeal arises in these circumstances. / The decision is final.	Gains: the board disappears, and with it any target for resentment; the refusal seems structural. Loses: accountability — nobody can be asked to reconsider.
3	Attendance is expected. / All staff are expected to attend.	Gains: "expected" implies a norm rather than a demand, which is harder to refuse than an order. Loses: clarity about whether it is compulsory — deliberately.
4	The leave requested cannot be authorised at this time.	Gains: total concealment; "cannot" implies impossibility rather than refusal, and "at this time" implies a process rather than a person. Loses: honesty. This is the sentence a human refusal becomes when it wants to avoid being one.

Teaching point: agent deletion is the single most consequential rhetorical move in deontic English. Learners should be able to perform it and to reverse it — reconstructing the deleted agent is the first move of critical reading.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Analytical Reading)

#	Answer
1	**Permission:** are invited to comment; are entitled to attend; may (implied). **Absence of obligation:** is not obliged to act; needn't worry. **Obligation:** must be submitted; are to have regard; shall be read (withheld). **Prohibition:** mustn't assume; are not entitled to speak. **Right:** are entitled to attend / not entitled to speak.
2	The pairing performs a bait and switch. The affirmed entitlement (to attend) is worthless; the negated one (to speak) is the one that mattered. Placing them in successive sentences, with "however" between, forces the reader to feel the concession being withdrawn. Note that both are framed as entitlements — the passage never says residents are *forbidden* to speak, only that they have no right to. The distinction is legally significant and rhetorically devastating.
3	"Be to" imposes a duty whose content is empty. "Must have regard to" would be equally vacuous, but "are to" adds institutional impersonality — this is what officers are for, not what someone has told them to do. It is unchallengeable because "having regard to" is unfalsifiable: an officer who read and dismissed every objection has complied. The grammar creates an obligation that cannot be breached, which is the same as no obligation, while looking like one.
4	"Is not obliged to" denies the existence of a duty — it is a statement about the council's legal position. "Need not act" would merely say action is unnecessary, which sounds like a practical observation. The chosen form is colder and more absolute: it forecloses the possibility that a duty might be argued for. It also implies someone has checked.
5	The register shifts from institutional reporting to the council's own reassuring voice — free indirect style. "We are told" marks it as ventriloquism: the writer is quoting the document's tone without endorsing it. The implied speaker is the council, and the irony is that "needn't worry" is precisely what one says to someone who has excellent reason to worry.

#	Answer
6	"One is supposed to find this reassuring" does three things at once. *Supposed to* signals a rule that is not observed — so the reader is being told that the reassurance fails. "One" is arch and distancing, mocking the document's own impersonality. And the sentence describes an obligation to *feel* something, which is the passage's final joke: the consultation cannot compel agreement, so it settles for compelling the appearance of it. The whole argument — that the document simulates duty without incurring any — is compressed into a single deontic form.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Transformation)

#	Answer
1	You **needn't have intervened**.
2	I **didn't have to attend**.
3	The vendor **is bound to disclose** all known defects.
4	He **wasn't obliged to accept** the terms.
5	We **are supposed to** [follow it] / **It is supposed to be** [followed].
6	Staff **are entitled to refuse** unsafe work.
7	No person **may remove documents** from the archive.
8	You **ought to seek advice** before signing.

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Drafting) — Model Answers

#	Model
1	"The Tenant shall permit the Landlord access to inspect the premises at all reasonable times, provided that the Landlord shall have given not less than 24 hours' written notice." — Note the double *shall*: the obligation and the condition on it are drafted with equal force, which is what protects the tenant.
2	"Photography for personal use is permitted and requires no prior authorisation. Images may not be reproduced, distributed or used for any commercial purpose." — The permission is granted *and* the absence of obligation is stated explicitly; without the second sentence, visitors assume they must ask.
3	"Thanks for thinking of me. My understanding is that the review sits with the Standards team rather than with us, so I'll leave it with them — do let me know if that's changed." — Declines by relocating the obligation rather than denying it. "My understanding is" allows retreat; "do let me know if that's changed" concedes the other's authority to correct.
4	"Staff are entitled to request flexible working, subject to operational requirements, which shall be determined by the line manager at the time of the request." — **Annotation:** the right is real ("are entitled to"), but it attaches only to *requesting*, not to obtaining. "Subject to" subordinates the entitlement to a condition; "shall be determined by" hands the condition to the very person the right was meant to constrain; "at the time of the request" prevents any precedent from accumulating. Every word is defensible and the right is void.

Marking Rubric — Extended Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct deontic structures used accurately	0–4
Precision	Source, force and scope of each obligation correctly encoded	0–4
Analysis	Engages with the grammar as evidence, not merely as illustration	0–3
Register	Formal-academic, consistent; no leakage between voices	0–2
Coherence	Argument develops; the candidate's own modality is controlled	0–2

Teacher Notes — Common C1 Pitfalls

- **Deontic/epistemic ambiguity is the C1 topic.** The forms are shared; only context disambiguates, and sometimes it doesn't. Learners who have been taught "must = obligation" in one lesson and "must = deduction" in another rarely realise these are the same word doing two jobs — and that native speakers exploit the overlap

deliberately.

- **needn't have vs didn't have to** still fails at C1, now in longer stretches where the entailment clashes with a later clause. Test with contradiction tasks, not gap-fills.
- **Deontic "bound to" vs epistemic "bound to".** "The trustee is bound to act in good faith" (duty) vs "Prices are bound to rise" (certainty). Same string, unrelated meanings. A genuinely useful diagnostic of C1 control.
- **Legal *shall* is not future.** It imposes a duty. Learners who translate it as future tense misread contracts; learners who deploy it in ordinary prose sound deranged. Both errors are worth showing.
- **Entitlement is not obligation.** A right may be waived; a duty may not. Learners routinely derive "must" from "is entitled to" — a conceptual error that grammar exercises alone will not fix.
- **Agent deletion is the skill that matters.** The Part B exercise — concealing and then reconstructing the source of an obligation — is the bridge from language study to critical reading. Candidates who can reverse the passive on a policy document have acquired something more durable than a modal paradigm.