Modal Verbs for Obligation, Prohibition and Permission — C2

CEFR Level C2 | 3 Worksheets: Marked Forms & Scope • Drafting, Concealment and Power • Literary and Legal Analysis | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Marked Forms and the Limits of the Deontic System

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C2 (CEFR)*

Reference: What Remains at C2

At C2 the deontic inventory is assumed. What is left is the marked, the archaic, the contested, and the theoretically awkward: forms whose rarity is itself a signal, and distinctions on which educated native speakers — and drafters of statute — openly disagree.

Form	Notes	Example
***shall* (imperative)**	Duty in statute; the "shall problem" is a live drafting controversy	The Lessee **shall** not assign the term.
***shall* (interrogative)**	Survives only in offers and suggestions	**Shall** I close the window?
must needs* / *needs must	Archaic; now self-consciously literary or jocular	Needs must when the devil drives.
***be to* (counterfactual)**	Unrealised obligation; distinct from the instructional use	He **was to** have chaired it, but fell ill.
***ought* + perfect**	Moral force + non-fulfilment; more principled than *should*	We **ought to have** intervened.
had best	Regional/archaic variant of *had better*	You **had best** say nothing.
be not to	Formal prohibition; distinct from *needn't*	The seal **is not to** be broken.
***let* (jussive)**	Third-person directive; liturgical, mathematical, legal	**Let** the record show the witness declined.
bare subjunctive	Mandative; obligatory in AmE, optional in BrE	The board insists that he **resign**.
be at liberty to	Formal permission with an implication of constraint elsewhere	You **are at liberty to** withdraw.
on pain of* / *under penalty of	Prohibition + explicit sanction	Silence, **on pain of** dismissal.
is required* vs *is requested	The politeness of institutions: one binds, one does not	Passengers **are requested** to remain seated.

Exercise A: Identify the Modality

For each, state (i) the deontic function, (ii) the register or genre it belongs to, and (iii) whether an unmarked paraphrase exists without loss.

1. "The Trustee shall not be liable for any loss arising from the exercise of this discretion."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
2. "He was to have signed the contract on Monday."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
3. "It is essential that every applicant be interviewed by two panel members."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
4. "Passengers are requested to keep their belongings with them at all times."

Function: _____ Register: _____

Paraphrase available? _____

5. "Let no one suppose that this concession was freely given."

Function: _____ Register: _____

Paraphrase available? _____

6. "You had best not mention the audit."

Function: _____ Register: _____

Paraphrase available? _____

Exercise B: Scope, Negation and the Deontic Trap

Deontic modals interact with negation in ways that generate systematic ambiguity — and the ambiguity is not the same as in the epistemic system. *You must not go* negates the complement (prohibition); *you need not go* negates the modal (no obligation). English has no single form that reliably distinguishes them for every modal.

For each sentence, give both readings, identify the dominant one, and disambiguate each with a rewrite.

1. "All employees may not attend the briefing."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

2. "You are not required to answer every question."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

3. "Everyone doesn't have to sign."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

4. "The Committee shall not be obliged to give reasons."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 2: Drafting, Concealment and the Grammar of Power

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Part A – The Same Obligation, Nine Ways

The content below is constant. Only the deontic packaging changes — and with it, who may be held responsible when the obligation is breached.

Obligation: the reader is to disclose a conflict of interest before voting.

Render it in each register. Do not repeat a structure. Note where the authority sits and who could be blamed for a breach.

1. A clause in a company's articles of association

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

2. A one-line reminder at the top of an agenda

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

3. A whispered word from a colleague as the vote is called

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

4. A statutory instrument

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

5. A code of conduct written by consultants

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

6. A chair's remark from the podium, addressed to nobody in particular

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

7. An internal email after the breach has already happened

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

8. A journalist's account of what the rule required

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

9. The same journalist's account of what the rule actually achieved

   _____

   Authority / blame: _____

Part B – Diagnosing Voice

Both extracts concern the same failure. Analyse how deontic modality constructs blame, and what each writer is trying to make the reader conclude.

> ***Extract 1:*** *"The officers were required to record the decision and did not. They ought to have known that the omission would be discovered. Nobody was obliged to conceal anything; each of them chose to."*

> ***Extract 2:*** *"The decision was not recorded. Officers are supposed to minute such matters, though it is understood that practice varies. It may be that the omission was not intended to mislead; no one, after all, was under any obligation to volunteer what had not been asked for."*

Analysis: _____

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Now rewrite Extract 2 so that it delivers the accusation of Extract 1 while remaining, on the page, entirely exculpatory — deniable to a lawyer, unmistakable to a reader.

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Part C – The Hollow Obligation

An obligation may be drafted so that it cannot be breached — and is therefore not an obligation at all, though it reads as one. *Have regard to*, *use best endeavours*, *as appropriate*, *subject to operational requirements*, *where practicable*: each imposes a duty and simultaneously dissolves it.

For each, explain the mechanism by which the duty is hollowed out, then redraft it so that the obligation actually binds.

1. "The Authority shall have regard to the representations received."
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it binds: _____
2. "The Supplier shall use its best endeavours to deliver by the agreed date."
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it binds: _____
3. "Staff are entitled to flexible working, subject to operational requirements."
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it binds: _____
4. "Consultation shall be undertaken where practicable and as appropriate."
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it binds: _____

Score: _____ / 35

Worksheet 3: Literary, Legal and Rhetorical Analysis

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Part A – Close Reading

Read the passage and answer the questions. It is written in free indirect style; the narrator's voice and the character's are deliberately fused.

> *She was to have gone up to London that week, and might have done, had anyone thought to ask her. One ought not to complain. The girls were not obliged to write, and did not; she was not entitled to expect it, whatever the vicar might say about duty, and duty was a word she had learnt not to use aloud. Let them please themselves. She needn't have kept the room aired all winter — nobody had asked her to, and nobody would have noticed if she had not — but a mother must do something, and there was nothing else she was permitted to do.*

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

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2. **"She was to have gone up to London"** — identify this construction. What does it tell us happened, and how does it differ from "she was going to go"?

_____

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3. **"One ought not to complain"** — who is the implied speaker? Trace the pronoun shift from *she* to *one* and back. What is the effect?

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4. **"not obliged to write"** and **"not entitled to expect it"** appear in the same sentence. Distinguish them precisely. Why does the narrator need both?

_____

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5. **"Let them please themselves"** — identify the form. Is this permission, resignation, or something else? Whose voice is it?

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6. **"a mother must do something"** — the only unhedged *must* in the passage. Analyse its placement and its source. Who imposes this obligation?

_____

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7. The passage closes on **"nothing else she was permitted to do."** The agent of the permission is never named. Reconstruct the deleted agent, and explain why the omission is the point.

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Part B – Pastiche

Write 100–130 words in free indirect style, in which a character catalogues the obligations of a role they did not choose. The deontic force must weaken steadily as the passage proceeds, ending in an obligation the character imposes on themselves. Use at least six distinct structures, including one counterfactual (*was to have*) and one marked or archaic form.

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Structures used: _____

Part C – Critical Essay

Write **250–300 words** on ONE of the following. Your own deontic modality will be assessed alongside your argument.

Topic A: "The passive voice is not the grammar of evasion but of legitimacy: an obligation with a visible author is merely one person's demand." Discuss.

Topic B: The drafting profession has spent forty years trying to abolish legal *shall* and has failed. Examine why, and what the failure reveals about deontic English.

Topic C: "Every right, examined grammatically, turns out to be a permission that somebody may withdraw." Evaluate.

My topic: ___ A ___ B ___ C

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Word count: _____

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C2 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Identifying Modality)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	The Trustee shall not be liable…	**Function:** not an obligation at all — an exclusion of liability, dressed as one. **Register:** trust deed. **Paraphrase:** "is not liable" is equivalent and clearer, which is precisely why drafters resist it: *shall* lends the clause the appearance of a duty being solemnly imposed rather than a protection being quietly claimed. The classic argument for abolishing legal *shall*.
2	He was to have signed on Monday.	**Function:** counterfactual — an obligation or arrangement that did not materialise. **Register:** narrative, journalistic. **Paraphrase:** none exact. "He was going to sign" loses the externality (someone arranged it); "he should have signed" imports blame. *Was to have* is uniquely neutral about fault while certain about non-occurrence.
3	It is essential that every applicant be interviewed.	**Function:** mandative — obligation via the bare subjunctive. **Register:** formal, and obligatory in AmE. **Paraphrase:** BrE permits "should be interviewed", which introduces a faint hedge the subjunctive lacks. The indicative ("is interviewed") changes it to a description. A rare case where the marked form is the precise one.
4	Passengers are requested to…	**Function:** a request wearing the uniform of an obligation. **Register:** institutional-polite. **Paraphrase:** "are required to" would bind; "please keep" would be honest. *Are requested* occupies the gap deliberately — it cannot be enforced, but non-compliance still feels like a transgression. The politeness of institutions is a technology, not a courtesy.
5	Let no one suppose…	**Function:** jussive — a third-person directive. **Register:** rhetorical, oratorical, faintly biblical. **Paraphrase:** "Nobody should suppose" is flat. The jussive claims an authority to legislate over the reader's beliefs, which is why it survives in polemic.
6	You had best not mention the audit.	**Function:** advice + threat. **Register:** regional/archaic variant of *had better*; in some dialects unmarked, elsewhere self-conscious. **Paraphrase:** "shouldn't mention" loses the menace entirely. The implied "…or else" is the content.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Scope and Negation)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	All employees may not attend.	A: **Prohibition over the whole set** — nobody is permitted (¬■ for each). B: **Negation of the universal** — not all are permitted; some are. **A dominant** in formal notices, where *may not* is frozen as prohibition; B is the compositional reading and surfaces in speech. Disambiguate: "No employee may attend" vs "Not all employees may attend."
2	You are not required to answer every question.	A: **¬(required: answer all)** — you may leave some out. B: **required: (not answer any)** — you are required not to answer. **A overwhelmingly dominant**; B is barely available but becomes live with contrastive stress on "not". Disambiguate: "You may leave some questions unanswered" vs "You are required to leave every question unanswered."
3	Everyone doesn't have to sign.	A: ¬∀ — not everyone needs to (some do). B: ∀¬ — nobody needs to. **Genuinely contested**: AmE readily accepts B, conservative BrE resists it and hears A. This is the deontic counterpart of the "must not" transatlantic split, and it reaches print. Disambiguate: "Not everyone has to sign" vs "Nobody has to sign."
4	The Committee shall not be obliged to give reasons.	A: **¬(obliged: give reasons)** — the duty is excluded; they may give reasons if they choose. B: **obliged: ¬(give reasons)** — they are required to withhold them. **A is intended and dominant**; B is available and would be catastrophic. Note the stacked deontics: *shall* imposes the very thing that removes an obligation. Drafters who object to legal *shall* cite exactly this construction. Disambiguate: "is under no obligation to give reasons" vs "shall not give reasons."

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Nine Registers)

Assess fit between structure, genre and the allocation of blame. Models:

Context	Model + authority / blame
Articles of association	"A director shall declare any interest in a proposed transaction before the matter is put to the vote." — Authority: the constitution itself. Blame: falls squarely on the named role. This is what a real obligation looks like.
Agenda reminder	"Members are reminded to declare any conflicts of interest." — Authority: concealed. "Are reminded" presupposes the duty already exists and everyone knows it; blame therefore attaches to the individual, not the chair who failed to explain it.
Whispered word	"You'll want to declare that before the vote." — Authority: none claimed. Framed as prudence, not duty — the speaker protects the hearer without invoking the rule, and neither can be blamed for the conversation.
Statutory instrument	"No member of the authority may vote upon any matter in which that member has a pecuniary interest." — Authority: Parliament. Blame: the member, absolutely. Note "no member … may" rather than "members must not" — the prohibition attaches to the world, not the reader.
Consultants' code	"Colleagues should feel empowered to surface any potential conflicts as they arise." — Authority: nowhere. Blame: unallocatable, by design. "Should feel empowered to" imposes no duty on anyone and could not be breached if one tried.
Chair from the podium	"I take it there are no interests to declare." — Authority: the chair, exercised by presupposition rather than instruction. Blame: pre-emptively shifted to anyone who now stays silent.
Post-breach email	"It had of course been open to colleagues to declare any interest at the appropriate time." — Authority: retrospective, and fictitious. "It had been open to" converts a duty into a foregone opportunity, so the failure becomes the individual's neglect rather than the institution's.
Journalist: the rule	"Under the company's own rules, directors were required to disclose any interest before voting." — Authority: reported, not owned. The journalist borrows the institution's force while remaining outside it.
Journalist: the reality	"Directors were, in theory, supposed to declare their interests." — *Supposed to* + "in theory" does the entire editorial job in four words. The rule is reported and discredited simultaneously, without a single assertion the paper would have to defend.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Diagnosing Voice)

Analysis. Extract 1 allocates blame with three moves: *were required to* establishes a duty that existed independently of the writer; *ought to have known* adds moral knowledge, converting omission into culpability; and *nobody was obliged to conceal … each of them chose to* forecloses the defence of coercion by explicitly removing it. Note the final verb — *chose* — is not modal at all. The modality builds the frame; a plain past-tense verb delivers the accusation. The reader is positioned as a juror who has been handed a finding.

Extract 2 dismantles each of those moves. The passive *was not recorded* deletes the agent before any duty is mentioned. *Are supposed to* reports the rule while signalling that the writer does not fully credit it, and *practice varies* converts a breach into a norm. *It may be that* imports epistemic hedging into a deontic passage — a category shift that makes the question of duty look like a question of fact. And *no one was under any obligation to volunteer what had not been asked for* is the crucial sentence: it is almost certainly true, entirely irrelevant, and invites the reader to supply the exculpation themselves. Extract 2 is not more cautious than Extract 1; it is differently aimed.

Rewrite model (exculpatory on the page, damning in effect): "The decision was not recorded. Officers are, of course, supposed to minute such matters, and it would be wrong to suggest that any of them set out to mislead — nobody, after all, was obliged to volunteer what had not been asked. One might observe only that the question was never asked, that the officers were the persons who would have had to ask it, and that the omission is not one they can be said to have been required to notice." — Every clause is defensible. The accusation is complete. This is the target skill: **the deontic hedge as instrument**.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (The Hollow Obligation)

#	Mechanism	Binding redraft
1	**Unfalsifiable compliance.** "Have regard to" is satisfied by reading and dismissing. No evidence could establish breach, so the duty is formally unbreachable — and an unbreachable duty is not a duty.	"The Authority shall respond in writing to each representation received, stating whether it has been accepted and, if not, the reasons for its rejection." — Compliance is now an artefact that either exists or does not.

#	Mechanism	Binding redraft
2	**Standard without a metric.** "Best endeavours" is genuinely a high standard in law, but supplies no measure, so breach must be litigated to be established — which converts the obligation into a cost calculation.	"The Supplier shall deliver by the agreed date. If delivery occurs later, the Supplier shall pay liquidated damages of £X per day." — The duty is unchanged; the consequence makes it operative.
3	**Condition swallows the right.** "Subject to operational requirements" subordinates the entitlement to a category the grantor defines, at a time the grantor chooses, with no test.	"Staff are entitled to flexible working. A request may be refused only on one or more of the grounds listed in Schedule 2, and the refusal shall be given in writing within ten working days." — The right now has a boundary somebody else cannot move.
4	**Double dissolution.** "Where practicable" makes the duty conditional on the duty-holder's own judgement; "as appropriate" makes its content conditional on the same judgement. Two escape hatches on one clause is a drafting confession.	"Consultation shall be undertaken before any decision under paragraph 4 is taken, and shall last not less than twenty-eight days." — Trigger and content are both specified by someone other than the person consulting.

Teaching point: candidates should leave this exercise able to read a policy and identify, within seconds, which of its obligations could ever be breached. That is a transferable skill and the strongest argument for teaching deontic grammar at this level at all.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Close Reading)

#	Answer / guidance
1	**Counterfactual:** was to have gone; might have done; needn't have kept. **Absence of obligation:** were not obliged to write; needn't have kept. **Prohibition (self-imposed):** had learnt not to use aloud. **Right (denied):** was not entitled to expect it. **Permission (jussive):** Let them please themselves. **Obligation:** ought not to complain; a mother must do something. **Permission (denied, agentless):** nothing else she was permitted to do.
2	*Was to have* + past participle: the counterfactual of the *be to* construction. It tells us definitively that she did not go, and that the arrangement was external — someone or something had settled it. "She was going to go" would locate the intention in her, and leaves open whether she went. The construction is doing precise work: it establishes non-occurrence while denying her any agency in it, which is the passage's subject.
3	The implied speaker is the community, the vicar, propriety itself — everything that is not her. The shift from *she* to *one* marks the moment her thought stops being hers and starts being a recitation of what she has been taught to think. *One ought not* is a rule she is performing for an audience that is not present. The pronoun returns to *she* immediately afterwards ("she was not entitled"), so the passage has, in three clauses, shown a mind being colonised and then released. This is free indirect style doing what only it can do.
4	*Not obliged to write* = no duty rests on the girls; the sentence is about them. *Not entitled to expect it* = no right rests on her; the sentence is about her. The narrator needs both because they are the two halves of the same absence, viewed from each end — and stating both, in one sentence, is how the passage makes the reader feel the symmetry as a trap. Either alone would be a complaint. Together they are a proof.
5	The jussive *let* — formally permission, granted by a speaker with the authority to grant it. Which she does not have: the girls will please themselves regardless. So the form is a claim to authority that the situation has already refuted, and the effect is resignation performing itself as permission. Reward students who see that the voice is hers, and that she is granting permission for something she cannot prevent — the grammatical equivalent of shutting a door that is already open.
6	It is placed immediately after *needn't have kept the room aired* — after the passage has established that the act was unnecessary, unrequested, and unnoticed. The *must* is therefore self-imposed, and it is the only obligation in the passage with any force. Note that its source is a definition ("a mother"), not a person: she has derived a duty from a category. This is the passage's argument — that where no one obliges you to anything, you will oblige yourself, because the alternative is to have no duties at all.
7	The deleted agent is everyone and no one: the vicar, the girls, the era, the household, the idea of what a woman in her position may do. The passive is doing the same work here that it does in a policy document — dissolving the source of a constraint so that it appears to be a property of the world rather than a decision somebody made. The omission is the point because a named agent could be argued with, resented, or defied. An agentless permission cannot. The passage ends by making the reader perform the reconstruction that the character never can.

Marking Rubric — Pastiche and Essay (Worksheet 3 Parts B and C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures including a counterfactual and a marked form	0–5

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Control of arc	Deontic force weakens as required; the gradient is deliberate, not accidental	0–5
Source control	Every obligation's agent is placed or deleted purposefully	0–4
Register integrity	No leakage between narratorial and character voice unless intended	0–4
Argument (Part C)	Position defended with grammatical evidence; candidate's own modality controlled	0–5

Teacher Notes — C2

- **The C1→C2 shift is from precision to consequence.** A C1 candidate selects the correct deontic form. A C2 candidate can say who benefits from the selection. Every exercise here is built on that distinction; mark for it.
- **Hollow obligations are the practical payoff.** Worksheet 2 Part C is the most useful page in the set for candidates heading into law, policy, journalism or management. "Have regard to" and "best endeavours" are not vague writing — they are precise instruments for creating the appearance of duty. Learners who can spot them read institutions differently afterwards.
- **The "shall problem" is genuinely unresolved.** Plain-language drafters have campaigned against legal *shall* since the 1970s; it persists because it marks a clause as operative, and no proposed replacement does that as economically. Do not present abolition as settled — the controversy is the lesson.
- **Scope ambiguity differs from the epistemic case.** "Everyone doesn't have to sign" splits transatlantically much as "must not" does, but the stakes are higher because deontic sentences allocate liability. Show a real example from a contract or a policy if you can find one; they are not hard to find.
- **Marked forms need a licence.** *Needs must*, *had best*, the jussive *let* — deployed without reason these read as costume. Insist candidates justify every marked form, and penalise pastiche that is merely archaic.
- **The bare subjunctive is a live BrE/AmE split.** "The board insists that he resign" (AmE, obligatory) vs "…that he should resign" (BrE, standard). Neither is an error. International candidates should know both and choose consciously.
- **Free indirect style is the hardest test in the language** for deontic control, because the obligation must be simultaneously the character's and the world's. A candidate who sustains it for 120 words has native-equivalent command — and, more to the point, has understood that grammar allocates power.