Modal Verbs for Permission — Asking, Giving and Refusing — B1

CEFR Level B1 | 3 Worksheets: The Politeness Ladder • Granting, Refusing, Withdrawing • Reading and Writing | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: The Politeness Ladder

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

Reference: Asking, From Direct to Very Indirect

English asks for permission on a ladder. The higher you climb, the more polite — and the longer and less direct the sentence becomes.

Form	Level	Example
Imperative + please	Very direct (not a request at all)	Pass me the salt, please.
Can I…?	Neutral, everyday	**Can I** borrow this?
Could I…?	Polite; the safe default with strangers	**Could I** ask you something?
May I…?	Formal	**May I** see your ticket?
Do you mind if I…?	Polite; note the present tense	**Do you mind if I** sit here?
Would you mind if I…?	More polite; note the past tense	**Would you mind if I** opened a window?
Would it be OK if I…?	Polite, informal-friendly	**Would it be OK if I** left early?
I was wondering if I could…	Very polite; used for big requests	**I was wondering if I could** take Friday off.
I don't suppose I could…?	Very polite; expects "no"	**I don't suppose I could** borrow the car?

The trap: "Do you mind if I…?" means "is it a problem for you?" So "No" = yes, go ahead, and "Yes" = no, don't. Native speakers usually answer "No, not at all" or "Go ahead" to avoid the confusion.

Exercise A: Rank by Politeness

Put these in order from MOST direct (1) to MOST polite (6).

Rank	Sentence
____	a. Could I borrow your notes?
____	b. Give me your notes.
____	c. I don't suppose I could borrow your notes?
____	d. Can I borrow your notes?
____	e. I was wondering if I could borrow your notes.
____	f. Would you mind if I borrowed your notes?

Exercise B: Complete the Requests

#	Sentence
1	Do you _____ if I open the window? It's stuffy in here.
2	Would you mind if I _____ (leave) a bit early today?
3	I was _____ if I could have a word with you after the meeting.
4	I don't _____ I could borrow twenty euros until Friday?

#	Sentence
5	Would it be _____ if I brought a friend to the party?
6	"Do you mind if I sit here?" — "_____ , not at all. Go ahead."

Exercise C: Error Analysis

Correct the error and explain the rule.

1. "Would you mind if I open the window?"
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
2. "Do you mind if I would sit here?"
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
3. "I was wondering if I can take Friday off."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
4. "Could I to ask you a question?"
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
5. "Do you mind if I smoke?" — "Yes, of course! Go ahead."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Granting, Refusing and Withdrawing

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

Part A – Giving Permission

Granting is easy — but the form should match the request.

Request	Natural grant	Unnatural ✗
Can I sit here?	Yes, sure. / Of course. / Go ahead.	"Yes, you can sit here." (stiff)
Could I ask you something?	Of course you can. / Certainly.	"Yes, you could." ✗
May I come in?	Please do. / Certainly.	"Yes, you may." (schoolteacher-ish)
Do you mind if I join you?	Not at all. / Please do.	"Yes." (means NO!)

Note: "Yes, you may" sounds like a teacher talking to a child. Adults say "Of course" or "Please do".

Part B – Refusing: The Four-Part Formula

English refuses indirectly. The parts you know from A2 now get more sophisticated.

Part	B1 options
Softener	I'm afraid… / Unfortunately… / I'd love to, but… / To be honest…
Refusal	that's not really possible / I'm not able to / that won't work, I'm afraid
Reason	we're fully booked / it's company policy / I've already promised it to someone
Offer	but I could… / what I can do is… / would … work instead?

"What I can do is…" is the most useful refusal phrase in professional English. It refuses and offers in one move.

Write a full refusal for each request. Use a different softener each time.

#	Request	Your refusal
1	"Could I have an extension on the deadline?"	_____
2	"Do you mind if I bring my dog?"	_____
3	"I was wondering if I could leave at three today."	_____
4	"Can I pay next week?"	_____
5	"I don't suppose I could swap shifts with you?"	_____

Part C – Withdrawing Permission

Taking permission back is harder than refusing it, because the person already has it. English softens this with apology, an external reason, and often the past.

Form	Example
I'm afraid I'm going to have to…	I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to move.
I know I said… but…	I know I said you could take Friday, but something's come up.
It turns out…	It turns out we need the room after all.
We can no longer…	We can no longer allow bags in this area.
I'm going to have to withdraw…	I'm going to have to withdraw that offer, I'm sorry.

Rewrite each blunt withdrawal politely.

1. "You can't sit there any more. Move."

→ _____

2. "I said you could borrow it but now you can't."

→ _____

3. "No more photos. Stop."

→ _____

4. "Your day off is cancelled."

→ _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Reading and Writing

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

Part A – Reading

Read the text and answer the questions.

> *Dana had been at the company three weeks when she asked for her first favour. "I was wondering if I could work from home on Thursdays," she said. Her manager, Owen, paused. "Do you mind if I ask why?" Dana explained about the childcare. "Of course," he said. "That's absolutely fine." Six weeks later, Owen stopped at her desk. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come in on Thursdays after all. It turns out the client wants weekly reviews and I can't move them." Dana was annoyed, but she noticed that he never once said she couldn't work from home. He said he was going to have to ask her not to — which was, she thought, a very careful way of putting it.*

1. Why did Dana use "**I was wondering if I could**" rather than "**Can I**"?

   _____

   _____

2. Owen asks "**Do you mind if I ask why?**" — why does he soften a question he is entitled to ask?

   _____

   _____

3. Identify the three parts of Owen's withdrawal of permission.

   _____

   _____

4. Dana notices Owen "never once said she couldn't". What did he say instead, and what is the difference?

   _____

   _____

5. Why does Owen say "**it turns out**" and "**I can't move them**"? What work do these phrases do?

   _____

   _____

Part B – Transformation

Rewrite each request using the word given, keeping the meaning.

1. "Can I leave early?" *(MIND)*

   → _____

2. "Is it OK if I bring someone?" *(WONDERING)*

   → _____

3. "Please can I borrow the car? I know it's a lot to ask." *(SUPPOSE)*

   → _____

4. "Can I ask you something?" *(MAY)*

   → _____

5. "Do you mind if I opened the window?" *(WOULD)*

   → _____

Part C – Writing

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

Topic A: Write an email asking your manager for something significant (leave, a change of hours, a training course). Anticipate their objection and answer it.

Topic B: Write a dialogue in which someone asks for something, is granted it, and then has it withdrawn a week later.

My topic: ___ A ___ B

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 30

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — B1 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Ranking)

1 = b (imperative) · **2 = d** (Can I) · **3 = a** (Could I) · **4 = f** (Would you mind if I) · **5 = e** (I was wondering) · **6 = c** (I don't suppose)

> *Accept e and f in either order. The key observation: as politeness rises, the request gets longer and the word "I" moves further from the front. Distance is politeness.*

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Gap Fill)

#	Answer	Why
1	mind	"Do you mind if" + present tense.
2	left	"Would you mind if" + past tense. This is the trap.
3	wondering	"I was wondering if I could" — fixed phrase, past continuous.
4	suppose	"I don't suppose I could…?" — expects refusal.
5	OK / all right	"Would it be OK if I…"
6	No	"Do you mind?" → "No" grants permission. This confuses everyone.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Errors)

#	Error	Correction & rule
1	Would you mind if I open	**Would you mind if I opened** — "would…mind if" takes the past. "Do you mind if I open" is the present alternative.
2	Do you mind if I would sit	**Do you mind if I sit** — "do…mind if" takes the present. No "would" in the clause.
3	I was wondering if I can	**I was wondering if I could** — the whole phrase backshifts. "Can" breaks the politeness the phrase is built on.
4	Could I to ask	**Could I ask** — no "to" after a modal.
5	"Yes, of course! Go ahead."	**"No, not at all. Go ahead."** — "Do you mind?" asks about a problem. "Yes" means "yes, it IS a problem" — the opposite of the speaker's intent.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Refusals)

Accept any complete refusal with a distinct softener. Models:

#	Model answer
1	I'm afraid that's not really possible — the client sees it on Monday. What I can do is take the last section off your hands.
2	Unfortunately we can't have dogs in the building — it's an insurance thing. There's a garden out the back if that helps?
3	I'd love to say yes, but we're short-staffed until four. Would three-thirty work instead?
4	To be honest, I can't do that — it's company policy on new accounts. What I can do is set up a payment plan.
5	Sorry, I can't this time — I've already swapped with Marek. Try Priya? She owes me one.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Withdrawing)

#	Blunt	Polite rewrite & mechanism
1	"You can't sit there any more."	"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to move — this row's reserved for the family." *Going to have to* makes the speaker a messenger, not an enforcer.
2	"I said you could but now you can't."	"I know I said you could borrow it, but it turns out I need it on Saturday — I'm really sorry." *I know I said* acknowledges the broken promise instead of pretending it never happened.

#	Blunt	Polite rewrite & mechanism
3	"No more photos. Stop."	"I'm sorry — we're not allowed to permit photography in this room. I should have said earlier." *Not allowed to permit* pushes the authority upwards, away from the speaker.
4	"Your day off is cancelled."	"I'm afraid something's come up and I'm going to have to ask you to work Thursday after all. I know that's not what we agreed." *Something's come up* supplies an agentless cause.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Reading)

#	Answer
1	The request was significant (a permanent change to her working pattern), she was new, and she was asking a superior. "Can I" would have been too casual for the size of the ask. The length of the phrase signals the weight of the request.
2	Because asking "why" implies the request might be refused, and demands justification — which is face-threatening. Softening it with "do you mind if" lets Dana refuse to answer without a confrontation. He is entitled to ask; the softener is what makes the entitlement bearable.
3	(1) Softener: "I'm afraid". (2) The withdrawal: "I'm going to have to ask you to come in on Thursdays after all". (3) External reason: "the client wants weekly reviews and I can't move them."
4	He said he was "going to have to ask" her not to. The difference: "you can't" is a decision he makes and owns. "I'm going to have to ask you" presents him as compelled by circumstance — he becomes a fellow victim of the client rather than the author of the decision. The permission is withdrawn just as completely, but nobody has to be the villain.
5	"It turns out" presents the new situation as something discovered rather than decided — nobody chose it. "I can't move them" claims that Owen himself lacks power. Together they relocate the decision outside the room, so Dana cannot argue with Owen without arguing with the universe.

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Transformation)

#	Answer
1	Do you **mind if I leave** early? / Would you **mind if I left** early?
2	I was **wondering if I could** bring someone.
3	I don't **suppose I could** borrow the car?
4	**May I** ask you something?
5	**Would** you mind if I opened the window?

Marking Guide — Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Five or more distinct structures used accurately	0–5
Register	Politeness level matches the size of the request and the relationship	0–4
Form	do/would mind tenses correct; no "to" after modals; "wondering if I could"	0–3
Task	Within 100–120 words; objection anticipated (A) or withdrawal handled (B)	0–3

Teacher Notes — Common B1 Problems

- **"Do you mind…?" is answered backwards.** The polite answer to "Do you mind if I sit here?" is *no*. Learners say "yes" meaning "yes, go ahead" and accidentally refuse. Native speakers dodge it with "Not at all" or "Go ahead" — teach those as the safe answers.
- **The tense split.** "Do you mind if I sit" (present) vs "Would you mind if I sat" (past). Both are correct; mixing them is not. Drill as a pair, never separately.
- **Politeness = distance = length.** The ladder in Worksheet 1 has a pattern worth making explicit: the more polite the request, the longer it gets and the later "I" appears. This single observation explains most of the system.
- **Withdrawal is harder than refusal** and is almost never taught. Someone who already has permission must be un-permitted, which threatens their face far more than a refusal would. The B1 workplace needs this; textbooks

stop at asking.

- **"What I can do is…" is the highest-value phrase here.** It refuses and offers simultaneously, and it makes a B1 speaker sound like a competent professional rather than an obstacle.
- **Towards B2:** next comes the discovery that the most polite requests contain no permission modal at all ("Any chance you could…?", "I don't suppose…"), and that over-politeness is itself a signal — of distance, of bad news coming, or of sarcasm.