Modal Verbs for Permission — Asking, Giving and Refusing — B2

CEFR Level B2 | 3 Worksheets: Indirectness & the Vanishing Modal • Refusal, Withdrawal and Face • Transformation and Writing | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Indirectness and the Vanishing Modal

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B2 (CEFR)

Reference: The Most Polite Requests Contain No Modal

At B2 the ladder is known. The insight now is that English politeness works by **removing the request from the surface** — turning a demand into a question about the hearer's state, or into no question at all.

Strategy	How it works	Example
Modal request	Direct: asks for permission	Could I borrow the car?
Question the hearer's state	Asks about them, not about your want	**Do you need** the car tonight?
Question feasibility	Asks about the world, not about permission	**Is there any chance** the car's free?
Pre-emptive apology	Apologises before asking anything	**I hate to ask, but**…
Hedged assertion	States a need; lets them offer	**I'm a bit stuck** for transport on Friday.
Hypothetical framing	Removes the request from reality	**If I were to ask** for the car, what would you say?
Negative-expectation	Offers them an easy refusal	**You wouldn't** let me borrow the car, **would you**?
Third-party attribution	Someone else wants it, not you	**Marta was asking whether** she could…

The paradox: "I'm a bit stuck for transport on Friday" is a request for the car. It contains no modal, no question mark, and no reference to the car. It is also more polite than "Could I borrow the car?" — because it lets the hearer volunteer, preserving the fiction that they were never asked.

Exercise A: Identify the Strategy

For each, name the strategy and say what the speaker is avoiding.

1. "You're not using the projector this afternoon, are you?"
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____
2. "I don't suppose there's any chance of an extension?"
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____
3. "I hate to be a nuisance, but would it be at all possible to swap desks?"
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____
4. "Sorry — is this seat taken?"
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____
5. "I was going to ask about Friday, but I know you're swamped."
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____
6. "Would it cause a problem if I brought someone?"
   Strategy: _____ Avoiding: _____

Exercise B: Complete the Requests

#	Sentence
1	I don't _____ you'd be able to cover my shift on Saturday?

#	Sentence
2	Is there any _____ of getting the report a day late?
3	You _____ have a spare charger, would you?
4	I was _____ if it might be possible to join the call remotely.
5	Would it be at all _____ to move the meeting to Thursday?
6	I _____ to ask, but could I possibly leave twenty minutes early?
7	I don't know if this is _____ , but could we split the presentation?
8	Any _____ you could look at this before Friday?

Exercise C: Error Analysis

All of these are grammatical. Each fails pragmatically. Diagnose the failure and fix it.

1. "Would you be so kind as to pass the salt?" *(to your flatmate, at dinner)*
   Failure: _____
   Fix: _____
2. "I don't suppose I could possibly trouble you to perhaps consider letting me leave slightly early, if that wouldn't be too inconvenient?" *(to a friendly colleague)*
   Failure: _____
   Fix: _____
3. "Do you mind if I take Thursday off?" *(you have already booked the flights)*
   Failure: _____
   Fix: _____
4. "May I borrow your pen?" *(to your brother)*
   Failure: _____
   Fix: _____
5. "I was wondering if I could possibly ask whether it might be conceivable to…" *(you are asking for a pen)*
   Failure: _____
   Fix: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Refusal, Withdrawal and Face

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B2 (CEFR)

Part A – The Anatomy of a Refusal

A skilled refusal protects the asker's dignity while closing the door. The techniques below do the work.

Technique	Effect	Example
External attribution	Nobody in the room decided this	Finance won't sign it off.
Impersonal construction	Deletes the refuser entirely	It's not something we're able to do.
Partial grant	Gives something to soften the loss	I can't do Friday, but I could do Monday.
Delay	Refuses without saying no	Let me look into it and come back to you.
Reciprocal regret	The refuser suffers too	I really wish I could.
Pre-emptive close	Removes the option before it is raised	Before you ask — the answer's no, and it's not mine to give.
Counter-request	Reverses the direction of obligation	Could you manage without it just this once?

Write a refusal for each, using the technique named. Do not use the word "no".

#	Request + technique	Your refusal
1	"Could I have a pay rise?" — external attribution	_____
2	"Can I borrow your flat for the weekend?" — reciprocal regret + partial grant	_____
3	"Would you mind if I brought my brother to the wedding?" — delay	_____
4	"Can I have your notes?" — counter-request	_____
5	"I was wondering about working from home permanently." — impersonal	_____

Part B – Withdrawing Permission

Withdrawal is the hardest speech act in this area: the hearer already has the thing, so you are not refusing but *taking away*. English handles it with agentless causes, shared regret, and the past.

Read the two withdrawals. Both revoke the same permission. Analyse the difference in what each does to the relationship.

> ***Version 1:*** *"I've decided you can't have Thursday off after all. I need you here."*
>
> ***Version 2:*** *"I'm so sorry — I know I said Thursday was fine, and I feel terrible about this, but the audit's been moved and I'm told I can't run it without you. Is there any way we could look at the following week?"*
>
> Analysis: _____

_____

_____

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Now write a third version that is as polite as Version 2 but as final as Version 1 — leaving the hearer no opening to negotiate.

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Part C – Reading

Read the passage and answer the questions.

> *The email arrived on a Friday. "Hi both — just a quick one. I don't suppose either of you would be able to cover the Saturday clinic? No pressure at all, and please don't feel you have to. Totally understand if not!" Rosa read it three times. There were two of them on the thread, which meant that whoever replied first would be free and whoever replied second would be working. The phrase "no pressure at all" had, she reflected, produced more pressure than any instruction she had ever received. She was not being asked. She was being invited to volunteer, which is a different thing entirely, and much harder to decline.*

1. Identify every politeness marker in the email. Count them.

_____

_____

2. Why does the sender use "**I don't suppose**" and "**would be able to**" rather than "can you"?

_____

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3. Rosa observes that "no pressure at all" produced pressure. Explain the mechanism.

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4. What is the significance of the email being addressed to **two** people rather than one?

_____

_____

5. "She was not being asked. She was being invited to volunteer." Distinguish these precisely. Why is the second harder to refuse?

_____

_____

6. Rewrite the email as a direct instruction. Then state what the sender gains and loses by not doing so.

_____

_____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 3: Transformation and Extended Writing

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: B2 (CEFR)

Part A – Sentence Transformation

Rewrite using the word given, between three and six words, keeping the meaning.

1. "Is it possible for me to see the file?" *(CHANCE)*

   → _____

2. "I know it's a big ask, but could I stay a few nights?" *(SUPPOSE)*

   → _____

3. "Please tell me if my bringing a guest is a problem." *(MIND)*

   → _____

4. "I'd like to leave early, though I doubt you'll agree." *(WOULDN'T)*

   → _____

5. "It is not within our power to authorise that." *(ABLE)*

   → _____

6. "I really want to say yes but I can't." *(WISH)*

   → _____

7. "I'm sorry to bother you, but could you look at this?" *(HATE)*

   → _____

8. "Would there be any objection to my recording this?" *(MIND)*

   → _____

Part B – Register Repair

The email below was written by a competent speaker with no ear for register. Every sentence is grammatical.

> ***Dear Priya,*** *May I request permission to attend the Berlin conference? I don't suppose there's any chance you'd possibly consider it? It would be great. Also I've booked the flights. You wouldn't say no, would you? Let me know if you mind.* ***Best, Tom***

Identify the four register failures — not grammar errors — and rewrite the email (60–80 words) so that it works.

Failures:

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Rewrite:

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Part C – Extended Writing

Write **150–180 words** on ONE of the following. Use at least **six** distinct structures (underline them).

Topic A: "In English, the politest request is the one that never has to be answered." Discuss.

Topic B: Write an exchange in which A asks for something significant, B refuses without ever saying no, and A understands perfectly.

Topic C: Describe a time you were refused something so politely that you did not realise until afterwards.

My topic: ___ A ___ B ___ C

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Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 6

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — B2 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Identify the Strategy)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	You're not using the projector, are you?	**Negative-expectation question.** Avoiding: the word "can", and any admission of wanting. The negative frame builds the refusal in, so declining costs nothing — which is precisely what makes agreeing easy.
2	I don't suppose there's any chance…	**Negative-expectation + feasibility.** Avoiding: asking a person at all. "Is there any chance" queries the world, not the hearer — so a refusal isn't theirs, it's the world's.
3	I hate to be a nuisance, but…	**Pre-emptive apology + hedged feasibility.** Avoiding: the imposition being noticed. Note "at all possible" — a double hedge on a request to move desks. Slightly over-egged, which itself signals the asker feels indebted.
4	Sorry — is this seat taken?	**Question the world.** Avoiding: asking permission from a person who has no authority to grant it. Nobody owns the seat; the question sidesteps the fiction that they do.
5	I was going to ask about Friday, but…	**Withdrawn request / hedged assertion.** Avoiding: the refusal. By retracting before asking, the speaker makes the hearer volunteer — and if they don't, nothing was ever refused. Deniable in both directions.
6	Would it cause a problem if I…	**Question the consequences.** Avoiding: the hearer's preferences. "Cause a problem" is objective-sounding; it invites a practical answer rather than a personal one, making a "no" feel like logistics rather than rejection.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Gap Fill)

#	Answer	#	Answer
1	suppose	5	possible
2	chance	6	hate
3	wouldn't	7	possible / feasible / an option
4	wondering	8	chance

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Pragmatic Failure)

#	Failure	Fix
1	**Over-politeness with an intimate.** "Would you be so kind as to" is the register of a Victorian butler. Directed at a flatmate it reads as sarcasm or passive aggression — the hearer will assume they have done something wrong.	"Pass the salt?" or "Salt?" — Between intimates, brevity IS politeness. Elaboration signals distance.
2	**Hedge stacking.** Six hedges on a twenty-minute request. The mismatch between the size of the ask and the scale of the apology suggests either that the speaker is terrified of the colleague, or that something else is going on. It creates alarm.	"Do you mind if I shoot off twenty minutes early? I'll make it up tomorrow." — Match hedging to the size of the imposition.
3	**False question.** "Do you mind if" presents a genuine choice. The flights are booked; there is no choice. The form lies, and if the hearer says "actually, yes" the deception is exposed.	"I need to ask a favour — I've had to book Thursday off for family reasons. I know I should have checked first." — Honest framing beats a fake question.
4	**Over-formality with a sibling.** "May I" between brothers is a joke or an insult.	"Give us your pen." / "Can I nick your pen?"
5	**Hedge-to-stakes mismatch, extreme.** Four hedges deployed to obtain a pen. The listener will start bracing for something serious and then feel manipulated.	"Can I borrow a pen?"

The unifying principle: politeness is not a scale to be maximised. It is a calibration. Too much is as much a failure as too little, and it is the error B2 learners actually make.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Refusals)

#	Model answer
1	"I'd back it in a heartbeat, but the freeze came down from Finance in January and I've had three of these knocked back since." — Nobody in the room said no.
2	"I really wish I could — I'd have loved to. My sister's staying that weekend, so the place is full. You'd be very welcome the weekend after, if that's any use?"
3	"Let me have a word with the venue about numbers and come back to you Friday." — No refusal is uttered. Most such delays are refusals, and both parties know it.
4	"Could you have a go at the first section yourself and then we compare? Mine are a mess anyway."
5	"Permanent home working isn't something the team is set up for at the moment." — No agent, no decision-maker, nobody to appeal to.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Withdrawal Analysis)

Analysis. Version 1 locates the decision entirely in the speaker ("I've decided") and states the reason as a personal want ("I need you here"). The hearer therefore has a target: they can argue, resent, or comply, but the relationship absorbs the damage. It is also efficient and unambiguous — its brutality is a form of respect for the hearer's time.

Version 2 does four things: it apologises before the content ("I'm so sorry"), it acknowledges the promise rather than pretending it never happened ("I know I said"), it supplies an agentless cause ("the audit's been moved" — by whom?) and a superior who cannot be argued with ("I'm told"), and it ends with a counter-offer that reframes the withdrawal as a negotiation. The hearer is left with nowhere to aim their annoyance, which is the point — but also with an opening ("is there any way"), which may not be one the speaker intends to honour.

Model Version 3 (polite but final): "I'm really sorry — I know I said Thursday was fine, and I wouldn't change it if I had any choice. The audit's been moved and it can't run without you, so I'm afraid Thursday is going to have to stand. I'll make sure you get the time back next month; tell me which week suits and I'll block it out now." — The apology and the agentless cause are retained; the negotiation is closed by stating the outcome as settled ("is going to have to stand") and redirecting the hearer's agency onto a different question (which week) that the speaker is happy to concede.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Reading)

#	Answer
1	"Hi both" (informal solidarity) · "just a quick one" (minimises the imposition) · "I don't suppose" (negative expectation) · "either of you" (diffuses the target) · "would be able to" (queries capacity, not willingness) · "No pressure at all" (explicit denial of pressure) · "please don't feel you have to" (explicit release) · "Totally understand if not!" (pre-emptive absolution) · the exclamation mark (tonal reassurance). **Nine.** The density is itself the signal.
2	"Can you" asks about willingness and puts the hearer on record. "I don't suppose … would be able to" queries capacity, builds in the expectation of refusal, and lets the hearer decline by citing circumstances rather than preference. The sender wants a volunteer, not a conscript — because a conscript can resent them and a volunteer cannot.
3	Explicit denial of pressure presupposes that pressure is available to be applied — you do not say "no pressure" to someone you have no power over. The phrase therefore reminds the hearer of the hierarchy while claiming to suspend it. It also transfers the moral burden: refusing now means refusing someone who was *nice about it*, which is harder than refusing an instruction.
4	It converts the request into a game between the recipients. Neither can refuse without knowing whether the other will, and the first to reply loses — or wins, depending on how you read it. The sender has outsourced the coercion to the pair, so no one has been asked and no one has been refused. Note that the sender may not have done this deliberately, which does not reduce the effect.
5	To be **asked** is to be presented with a request you may decline; the asker owns the request and absorbs the refusal. To be **invited to volunteer** is to be offered the opportunity to be generous — and declining is therefore not a refusal of a request but a failure of character. The first costs you nothing; the second costs you the identity of a helpful colleague. This is why the volunteer framing is both politer and more coercive, and why it is everywhere in professional English.

#	Answer
6	**Direct version:** "Rosa — I need you to cover the Saturday clinic." **Gains:** Rosa knows where she stands, can plan, and can refuse cleanly on stated grounds; the sender owns the imposition, and the relationship carries no hidden debt. **Loses:** the sender must be the person who imposed it, and must absorb whatever resentment follows. The email's indirectness buys the sender innocence — at the cost of Rosa's Saturday and her ability to object to anything.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Transformation)

#	Answer
1	Is there **any chance I could** see the file?
2	I don't **suppose I could** stay a few nights?
3	Do you **mind if I bring** a guest?
4	You **wouldn't let me leave** early, would you?
5	We'**re not able to authorise** that.
6	I **wish I could** (say yes).
7	I **hate to bother you, but** could you look at this?
8	Would you **mind if I recorded** this?

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Register Repair)

#	Failure	Explanation
1	Register whiplash	"May I request permission" (bureaucratic) sits beside "It would be great" (casual) and "You wouldn't say no, would you?" (wheedling). Three registers in five sentences; the reader cannot tell what relationship is being claimed.
2	The flights	Booking first destroys every hedge that precedes it. All the politeness was a performance concealing a fait accompli — which is worse than asking directly, because now Priya knows she was being managed.
3	"You wouldn't say no, would you?"	Negative-expectation questions offer an easy refusal. Used on a superior after presenting a fait accompli, it reads as pressure dressed as deference. It also invites the answer "Yes, I would."
4	"Let me know if you mind"	Inverts the burden: Priya must now actively object rather than actively approve. Silence becomes consent. This is a manipulation, and a manager will read it as one instantly.

Model rewrite: "Dear Priya, I'd like to put in a request to attend the Berlin conference in March — the sessions on retrieval are directly relevant to what we're building, and I'd write it up for the team afterwards. I should be upfront: I held a flight to secure the fare, which I can cancel free until the 12th if this isn't possible. Happy to talk it through whenever suits. Best, Tom" — *One register throughout. The fait accompli is disclosed rather than concealed, with the escape route stated. The request is made once, clearly, with a reason.*

Marking Guide — Extended Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures used accurately	0–5
Calibration	Politeness matches the imposition; no hedge stacking, no under-hedging	0–4
Face-work	Refusals and withdrawals protect the hearer; indirectness serves a purpose	0–3
Register	Consistent throughout; no whiplash between formal and casual	0–3

Teacher Notes — Common B2 Problems

- **Over-politeness is the characteristic B2 error.** Having learnt the ladder at B1, learners climb to the top and stay there. "Would you be so kind" to a flatmate is not politer than "pass the salt" — it is a signal that something

is wrong. Politeness is calibration, not maximisation, and Worksheet 1 Exercise C is built entirely around this.

- **Hedge-to-stakes ratio** is the diagnostic. Count the hedges, weigh the imposition. A pen needs none; a week of someone's holiday needs several. A mismatch in either direction is the error.
- **The most polite requests contain no modal.** This is genuinely counter-intuitive to learners who have spent three levels acquiring modals. "I'm a bit stuck for transport on Friday" outperforms "Could I possibly borrow the car?" because it lets the hearer volunteer. Volunteering cannot be refused, only declined — and declining a hint costs nothing, which is what makes the hint polite.
- **"No pressure" applies pressure.** The Worksheet 2 reading is the centrepiece. Explicit denials of pressure presuppose the capacity to apply it. Learners entering English-speaking workplaces need to be able to read these emails, not just write them.
- **Withdrawal remains under-taught** and is the B2 skill most likely to be needed at work. The agentless cause ("the audit's been moved") and the shared-victim frame ("I'm told I can't") are the two techniques worth drilling.
- **Towards C1:** the next step is recognising that indirectness is not always kindness — that it can conceal coercion, transfer blame, and manufacture consent, and that the grammar of politeness is also the grammar of power.