Modal Verbs for Permission — Asking, Giving and Refusing — C2

CEFR Level C2 | 3 Worksheets: Marked Forms & Scope • Consent, Coercion and Limits • Literary and Rhetorical Analysis | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Marked Forms, Scope and the Grammar of Licence

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

Reference: What Remains at C2

At C2 the permission system is known. What remains is the marked, the archaic, the legally loaded, and the theoretically awkward — including the question of whether English possesses any structure that grants permission without simultaneously claiming the authority to withhold it.

Form	Notes	Example
***may* (permissive, formal)**	The canonical grant; increasingly confined to writing	Members **may** bring one guest.
***might* (permissive)**	Weakest grant in the language; faintly grudging	You **might**, if you wish, decline.
be at liberty to	Formal; implies constraint exists elsewhere	You **are at liberty to** withdraw.
be free to	Grants by describing a state, not an act	Participants **are free to** leave.
have leave to	Archaic/legal; survives in court usage	The appellant **has leave to** appeal.
by your leave	Archaic; now ironic or literary	**By your leave**, I shall proceed.
***suffer* + inf**	Archaic permissive; biblical residue	**Suffer** the little children **to come** unto me.
***let* (permissive vs jussive)**	Two distinct constructions, one word	**Let** him speak. / **Let** the record show…
be permitted* vs *be entitled	Permission is granted; entitlement is held	Permitted to attend / entitled to attend.
***cannot* (deontic vs alethic)**	Prohibition or impossibility — often deliberately unclear	You **cannot** enter.
needn't ask* / *no need to ask	Pre-empts a request; asserts intimacy or ownership	You **needn't ask** — it's yours.
negative-raised *don't think*	Refusal displaced into the matrix clause	I **don't think** you can, I'm afraid.

Exercise A: Identify the Modality

For each: (i) the function, (ii) the register or genre, (iii) whether an unmarked paraphrase exists without loss.

1. "The applicant has leave to appeal to the Supreme Court on the second ground only."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
2. "You might at least have asked."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
3. "By your leave, I shall take the second point first."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
4. "I don't think we can let that go through, I'm afraid."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____

5. "Let him finish."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____
6. "You are at liberty to disregard everything I have said."
   Function: _____ Register: _____
   Paraphrase available? _____

Exercise B: Scope, Negation and the Permission Trap

Permission interacts with negation and quantifiers to produce ambiguities distinct from those of obligation. *You may not go* negates the complement (prohibition); *you needn't go* negates the modal. But *may not* is also the epistemic "possibly not" — so a single string carries prohibition, absence of permission, and epistemic hedge.

Give every reading, identify the dominant one, and disambiguate each.

1. "Members may not bring guests."
   Readings: _____
   Dominant + disambiguation: _____
2. "Not everyone is permitted to vote."
   Readings: _____
   Dominant + disambiguation: _____
3. "You can't not attend."
   Readings: _____
   Dominant + disambiguation: _____
4. "Nobody is free to leave."
   Readings: _____
   Dominant + disambiguation: _____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 2: Consent, Coercion and the Limits of Grammar

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

Part A – The Same Grant, Nine Ways

The content is constant: **the reader may leave the study at any point**. Only the packaging changes — and with it, the likelihood that anyone ever will.

Render it for each context. Do not repeat a structure. Note in each case whether the grant makes the act more or less likely.

1. An ethics committee's model wording

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

2. The same study's recruitment poster

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

3. A researcher speaking to a nervous participant

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

4. A statute governing clinical trials

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

5. The information sheet's small print

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

6. A journalist describing what participants were told

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

7. The same journalist describing what participants understood

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

8. A participant explaining afterwards why they stayed

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

9. The researcher, privately, to a colleague

   _____

   Makes withdrawal more / less likely because: _____

Part B – Diagnosing Voice

Both extracts describe the same policy. Analyse how permission structures construct innocence, and what each writer wants the reader to conclude.

> ***Extract 1:*** *"Staff were permitted to raise concerns through the confidential line. Nobody was prevented from doing so. Two did; both were subsequently managed out, though no one has suggested the two facts are connected."*

> ***Extract 2:*** *"Staff were free to raise concerns, and the line remained open throughout. It may be that some felt inhibited; one cannot legislate for perception. Certainly nobody was forbidden to speak, and it would be wrong to imply otherwise."*

Analysis: _____

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Rewrite Extract 2 so that it delivers Extract 1's indictment while remaining, on the page, a defence of the employer.

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Part C – The Hollow Permission

A permission may be drafted so that it cannot be exercised — and is therefore not a permission, though it reads as one. The techniques mirror those of the hollow obligation, inverted.

For each, explain the mechanism, then redraft so that the permission is actually usable.

1. "Participants are free to withdraw at any time." *(withdrawal after session three forfeits payment)*
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it can be exercised: _____
2. "Employees may raise a grievance with their line manager." *(the grievance concerns the line manager)*
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it can be exercised: _____
3. "You are welcome to appeal this decision." *(the appeal is heard by the decision-maker)*
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it can be exercised: _____
4. "Members may request access to the minutes, subject to the Secretary's discretion."
   Mechanism: _____
   Redraft so that it can be exercised: _____

Score: _____ / 35

Worksheet 3: Literary 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.

> *She was free to go, of course. Nobody had ever said otherwise; nobody would have dreamt of saying otherwise. Her father had been most particular on the point — she might marry whom she liked, he said, and had said it often, in company, where it did him credit. She was at liberty. One could hardly ask for more. And if she had asked, at twenty-two, by your leave, to take the Edinburgh post, he would have smiled and said of course, my dear, and something would have happened — a chill, a downturn, a letter that needed answering — and she would not have gone, and no one would have forbidden her. Let her go, he might have said. He never had to.*

1. Identify every permission structure. Note that not one is a prohibition. Why does the passage need this to be true?

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2. "**She might marry whom she liked**" — analyse the modal. Why *might* and not *could* or *may*? What does the choice concede?

_____

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3. "**He said it often, in company, where it did him credit**" — what does this reveal about the function of the grant? Who was it for?

_____

_____

4. "**By your leave**" appears inside a counterfactual. Identify the construction and explain what the archaism is doing there.

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5. "**Something would have happened** — a chill, a downturn, a letter that needed answering" — how does this list operate? Why are the items trivial, and why is the agent absent?

_____

_____

6. "**Let her go, he might have said. He never had to.**" — analyse the final two sentences. Distinguish the two modals. What is the passage's argument, compressed here?

_____

_____

7. The passage grants freedom in every sentence and describes a woman who never left. Explain how the grammar of permission is being used to depict coercion without naming any.

_____

_____

Part B – Pastiche

Write 100–130 words in free indirect style in which a character is granted a permission they will never exercise. No prohibition may appear. Use at least six distinct permission structures, including one marked or archaic form and one counterfactual. The reader must understand that the character is not free.

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Structures used: _____

Part C – Critical Essay

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

Topic A: "English has no way of granting permission that does not also assert the right to refuse it. Freedom, grammatically, is always someone's gift." Discuss.

Topic B: "The consent form is the characteristic literary genre of our era: a document that produces the appearance of freedom as a by-product of removing it." Evaluate.

Topic C: Examine the claim that a permission which is never refused and a prohibition which is never issued are, functionally, the same instrument.

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	has leave to appeal	**Function:** permission, judicially granted — and note that *leave* here is a countable noun, not a modal. **Register:** court usage, entirely alive. **Paraphrase:** "is allowed to appeal" loses the fact that leave is a thing the court *gives* and can therefore limit ("on the second ground only"). The nominalisation is what permits the restriction.
2	You might at least have asked.	**Function:** not permission at all — reproach. *Might* + perfect + "at least" is a frozen idiom of complaint. **Register:** conversational. **Paraphrase:** none; "you should have asked" is a rebuke about duty, this is a rebuke about courtesy. Note that the permission modal has been fully bleached.
3	By your leave, I shall…	**Function:** formally a request; actually an announcement — the speaker proceeds. **Register:** archaic; now ironic, literary, or self-consciously courtly. **Paraphrase:** "If I may" is the living equivalent, but loses the archaism's signal that the speaker knows the formula is empty and is enjoying it.
4	I don't think we can let that go through.	**Function:** refusal, via negative raising — the negation belongs semantically to the embedded clause ("I think we cannot") but surfaces in the matrix. **Register:** professional, softening. **Paraphrase:** "We can't let that through" is identical in force and markedly harsher; the raising is what makes the refusal survivable. Note the double softening: raising plus "I'm afraid".
5	Let him finish.	**Function: permissive** *let* — an instruction to a third party to permit. Distinguish from the jussive ("Let the record show"), which is a directive addressed to nobody. **Register:** neutral. **Paraphrase:** "Allow him to finish" is stiffer; "don't interrupt him" is a prohibition and therefore a different act.
6	You are at liberty to disregard…	**Function:** permission — and, in context, almost certainly sarcasm. **Register:** formal, faintly forensic. **Paraphrase:** "you can ignore me" says the same and concedes nothing; "at liberty" implies liberty was in question, which is the barb. The form presupposes a constraint in order to waive it.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Scope and Negation)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	Members may not bring guests.	A: **Prohibition** (¬■: not permitted) — dominant in regulations, where *may not* is frozen. B: **Epistemic** ("it is possible members will not bring guests") — live in "Members may not bring guests, so cater for forty." C: **Absence of permission over a subset** — barely available. Disambiguate: "Members are not permitted to bring guests" / "Members might not bring guests."
2	Not everyone is permitted to vote.	A: ¬∀ — some are, some aren't (dominant). B: ∀¬ — nobody is. B requires heavy stress and is vanishingly rare, but the sentence is a genuine trap in constitutional drafting, where "not all members may vote" and "no member may vote" are catastrophically different. Disambiguate: "Some are not permitted to vote" / "No one is permitted to vote."
3	You can't not attend.	A: **Deontic double negation** — attendance is compulsory (dominant). B: **Alethic** — non-attendance is impossible (you are already there; the meeting is in your office). The construction is interesting because it expresses obligation using only permission vocabulary — and is markedly stronger than "you must attend", because it forecloses the alternative rather than commanding the act.
4	Nobody is free to leave.	A: **Prohibition** — no one is permitted (dominant). B: **Alethic** — no one is able (the doors are locked; the snow). C: the sinister third reading — everyone is *formally* free and none is *actually* free, which is what the sentence means in most novels it appears in. Note that "free to" is uniquely able to carry all three, which is why it is the preferred verb of both hostage negotiators and ethics committees.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Nine Grants)

Assess fit between structure, genre and effect on the likelihood of withdrawal. Models:

Context	Model + effect
Ethics committee wording	"You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason." — **Neutral-to-less likely.** The canonical formula is so familiar it has stopped being read; its very standardness makes it invisible.
Recruitment poster	"Take part if you'd like to — you can stop whenever you want." — **More likely.** Colloquial, unhedged, addressed to a reader with no relationship to protect.
Researcher to participant	"And do say if you'd rather stop — honestly, it's completely fine." — **Less likely.** The warmth creates the relationship that makes withdrawal a betrayal. Sincerity is the mechanism, not a defence against it.
Statute	"A participant may withdraw consent at any time and shall not thereby incur any liability." — **More likely.** Rights that are stated as immune from consequence are the only ones people use.
Small print	"Participants may withdraw, subject to the provisions of clause 9(b)." — **Much less likely.** The cross-reference is the mechanism; nobody reads 9(b), and everybody senses it is where the cost lives.
Journalist: what they were told	"Participants were told they were free to leave at any point." — Reports the grant, borrows its authority, commits to nothing.
Journalist: what they understood	"Participants were, in theory, free to leave." — **"In theory" does the whole editorial job.** The grant is reported and voided in four words, and the paper has asserted nothing it must defend.
Participant afterwards	"I mean, I could have left. Nobody stopped me." — **The passage's thesis in the participant's own mouth.** "Could have" + "nobody stopped me" is what coercion sounds like from inside: the freedom is remembered as real, and the non-exercise as a choice.
Researcher, privately	"They can go whenever they like. They never do." — The quiet part. Note that both sentences are true, and that their conjunction is the entire ethical problem.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Diagnosing Voice)

Analysis. Extract 1 grants throughout ("were permitted", "nobody was prevented") and then places two facts in adjacency: two people spoke; both were removed. The final clause — "though no one has suggested the two facts are connected" — is the mechanism. It is literally true, it disclaims the inference, and it plants it. The writer has constructed an accusation entirely out of permissions and a denial. Note that the sentence would survive libel scrutiny precisely because every proposition in it is either true or attributed to nobody.

Extract 2 is doing something subtler and worse. "Free to raise concerns" is the same grant, but "the line remained open throughout" shifts the evidence from behaviour to infrastructure — the phone worked, therefore nothing was wrong. "It may be that some felt inhibited" concedes the point while reclassifying it: inhibition becomes a *perception*, and "one cannot legislate for perception" makes it the perceiver's problem. The passive "nobody was forbidden" is doing the heavy lifting: it is unfalsifiable, since no one is ever forbidden to speak, and it defends against an accusation nobody made. The closing "it would be wrong to imply otherwise" pre-emptively delegitimises the reader's own inference. Extract 2 is not more cautious than Extract 1 — it is aimed at the reader rather than the employer.

Model rewrite (a defence that indicts): "Staff were free to raise concerns, and it would be wrong to suggest that anyone was forbidden to do so. The line remained open throughout; two colleagues used it. Both have since left the organisation, for reasons unconnected with the line and which the company is not at liberty to discuss. No inference should be drawn from the timing, and none has been." — *Every clause is exculpatory. "Not at liberty to discuss" invents a constraint that implies substance; "no inference should be drawn" instructs the reader to draw it; "and none has been" is a lie so thin it functions as a wink. The defence is complete and the reader knows everything.*

Worksheet 2 – Part C (The Hollow Permission)

#	Mechanism	Usable redraft
1	**Cost relocation.** The permission is unconditional; the *consequence* is not. Withdrawal is free and forfeits £200, so the grant is true and the freedom is priced. Note the drafting is not deceptive — the cost simply lives in a different clause, and clauses are read separately.	"You may withdraw at any time. If you withdraw after session three, you will receive payment pro rata for the sessions completed." — The cost is disclosed adjacent to the grant, where it will actually be read.
2	**Routing failure.** The permission is real and the channel runs through the subject of the complaint. Formally you may raise it; practically you must raise it with the person it concerns, which no one will do. The clause is a filter disguised as a door.	"Employees may raise a grievance with their line manager, or, where the grievance concerns that manager, with any other manager of equivalent or higher grade, or directly with HR." — An alternative route is what converts a permission into an option.
3	**Circular adjudication.** "Welcome to appeal" asserts ownership of the appeal (see C1), and the appeal returns to the decision-maker. The permission is unlimited and the outcome is fixed, which makes exercising it worse than useless — it costs the appellant time and marks them as a complainer.	"The decision may be appealed within fourteen days to a panel of three, none of whom shall have been involved in the original decision. The panel's decision is final." — Independence, not generosity, is what a permission to appeal requires.
4	**Discretion swallows the grant.** "May request" is honest — you may indeed *request*. Access is a separate matter, governed by an undefined discretion with no criteria, no timescale, and no appeal. The clause grants the act of asking, which nobody wanted.	"Members are entitled to inspect the minutes of any meeting within ten working days of a request. Access may be refused only where the minutes concern an individual's personal data, and any refusal shall be given in writing with reasons." — Entitlement, deadline, exhaustive grounds, written refusal.

Teaching point: the four mechanisms — cost relocation, routing failure, circular adjudication, unbounded discretion — cover most hollow permissions candidates will meet in employment contracts, consent forms and terms of service. Learners who can name them can read a document in thirty seconds and identify which of its freedoms are real.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Close Reading)

#	Answer / guidance
1	**Grants:** was free to go · nobody had ever said otherwise · might marry whom she liked · was at liberty · could hardly ask for more · would have smiled and said of course · Let her go · no one would have forbidden her. **Counterfactual permission:** if she had asked … by your leave. Not one prohibition appears. The passage requires this because its argument is that prohibition was never necessary — a single "no" would have given her something to defy, and would have located the constraint outside her. The absence of prohibition is what makes the coercion complete and unnameable.
2	*Might* is the weakest permissive in English, and it is grudging in a way *may* is not: *may* grants, *might* concedes. "She may marry whom she likes" would be a statement of her freedom; "she might marry whom she liked" is a statement of his forbearance. The choice concedes that the freedom is his to extend — which is exactly what the sentence is pretending not to say. Note also the backshift into free indirect style: this is his phrasing, reported in her thought.
3	The grant was for the audience, not the daughter. "Where it did him credit" reveals that the permission is a performance of liberality — its function is to constitute him as a modern and generous father in the eyes of company. A permission announced publicly and repeatedly is not for the person it concerns; if it were, once, privately, would have sufficed. Reward students who notice that the repetition ("had said it often") is evidence: real permissions are stated once.
4	A counterfactual conditional ("if she had asked … he would have smiled") containing an archaic permissive formula. The archaism is doing two things. First, it is hers — she is imagining herself asking, and the formality of "by your leave" shows how large the asking felt from inside, how much ceremony it would have required. Second, it is ironic: "by your leave" is a formula that does not wait for an answer, and she never got to use it. The passage lets her rehearse a request she was free to make and never made.
5	The list is the mechanism. Each item is trivial ("a letter that needed answering") and none is a refusal; together they constitute an insuperable obstacle. The agent is absent because there is no agent — "something would have happened" is agentless by construction, and that is the point: nobody would have stopped her, and she would not have gone. The trivia matter because grand obstacles can be overcome and named; a chill cannot be defied. The passage is describing how a life is closed by nothing in particular.

#	Answer / guidance
6	"Let her go" is permissive *let* — a third-party grant, imagined in his voice, magnanimous. "*He might have said*" is doubly hedged: counterfactual (he didn't) and weak-permissive-adjacent, importing the same grudging note as "she might marry whom she liked". Then: "He never had to." Four words, no modal of permission at all, and the argument lands. He never had to grant it, because she never asked; she never asked because the asking had been made unaskable by the very generosity that made it unnecessary. The compressed thesis: a permission that is never requested has done more work than any prohibition could.
7	By making every sentence a grant and the cumulative effect a cage. The passage never lets the reader locate a constraint, because there isn't one — there is only a father who says yes in company, an atmosphere in which asking would be a scene, and a series of small contingencies that would have intervened. Coercion here is not an act but a distribution of costs: she was free, and freedom was expensive, and she declined to spend. The grammar does the work because permission-granting language *presupposes* the authority to withhold, and a life spent inside that presupposition never encounters the moment where the authority is exercised — which is why it can never be resisted, and why the passage is written in his phrases and her thought at once.

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

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures including a marked form and a counterfactual	0–5
Constraint	No prohibition appears; the unfreedom is achieved by grants alone	0–5
Voice	Free indirect style sustained; grant belongs to one voice, perception to another	0–4
Precision	Every form is the only one that would do; no default reaching for may/can	0–4
Argument (Part C)	Position defended with grammatical evidence; own modality controlled	0–5

Teacher Notes — C2

- **The C2 question is whether permission is possible at all.** Every grant in English presupposes the authority to refuse — "you're free to go" can only be said by someone who could have said otherwise. Topic A asks candidates to test this. The strongest answers find the edge cases (*be entitled to*, which locates the right in the holder; the agentless "the decision may be appealed") and then notice that even these were drafted by someone.
- **Hollow permissions are the practical payoff.** Cost relocation, routing failure, circular adjudication, unbounded discretion — these four mechanisms appear in nearly every consent form, employment contract and terms-of-service document a candidate will sign. Worksheet 2 Part C is the most transferable page in the set.
- **Negative raising is under-taught and everywhere.** "I don't think we can" is semantically "I think we can't" — the negation has moved into the matrix clause to soften the refusal. Learners who produce "I think we cannot let that through" are grammatical and sound like a machine.
- ***May not* is triply ambiguous** — prohibition, absence of permission, epistemic hedge — and the ambiguity is load-bearing in regulations. Unlike the obligation system, where the trap is scope, here the trap is that a single string spans two modal systems.
- **Do not let the material become a conspiracy theory.** The passage in Worksheet 3 describes a father who almost certainly believed himself generous, and was. Manufactured consent is mostly not manufactured deliberately; it is what happens when someone with power is also polite. Candidates who conclude that all grants are traps have learnt the wrong lesson and will write worse essays for it.
- **Free indirect style is the hardest test in the language** for permission, because the grant must belong to one voice and the perception of it to another, simultaneously. A candidate who sustains it for 120 words — and gets the reader to see a cage built entirely out of yeses — has native-equivalent command and has understood the thing the whole six-level sequence was for.