

Express Prohibition and Obligation

Permission

Can, could, may, might

The most common modal verbs to talk about permission are: **can**, **could**, **may** and **might**.

- ASKING FOR PERMISSION (INFORMAL): ***Can** I sit here?*
- ASKING FOR PERMISSION (FORMAL): ***Could** I use this chair? **Might/May** I use this chair?*
- GIVING PERMISSION (INFORMAL): *You **can** sit here.*
- GIVING PERMISSION (FORMAL): *You **may** use this chair.*
- REFUSING PERMISSION (INFORMAL): *Sorry, you **can't** use this chair.*
- REFUSING PERMISSION (FORMAL): *Sorry, you **may not** use this chair.*

Was/were allowed to, couldn't

To talk about permission in the past, we can use the forms **was/were allowed to** or the negative form **couldn't**. We don't use the affirmative form **could** to talk about permission in the past.

- *He **wasn't** allowed to sit down during the lesson.*
- *He **couldn't** sit down during the lesson.*
- *He **could** receive visits. ❌*
- *He **was** allowed to receive visits. ✅*

Obligation

MUST VS. HAVE TO – MEANING

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You **must** rest for two weeks.

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DOCTOR



I **have to** rest for two weeks.

PATIENT

MUST	HAVE TO
Obligation that comes from the speaker. The speaker thinks it's necessary. MANAGER: You must be here at 7. SMOKER*: I must stop smoking. *The obligation comes from the smoker. The smoker thinks it's necessary.	External obligation. Another person thinks it's necessary. WORKER: I have to be there at 7. SMOKER*: I have to stop smoking. *The obligation comes from the doctor. The doctor thinks it's necessary.
MUSTN'T	DON'T HAVE TO
Prohibition. You can't do something. It's necessary that you don't do it. You mustn't wait here. You can't wait here. It's not allowed. He mustn't call her at work. He can't call her at work. It's necessary that he doesn't call her at work.	No obligation. You can do something but you don't need to do it. Not necessary. You don't have to wait here. You don't need to wait here. Not necessary. He doesn't have to call her at work. He doesn't need to call her if he doesn't want to do it. It's not necessary.

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Must / have to

Must and **have to** are used to express obligation. When we use **must** this usually means that the obligation comes from the speaker, it's like a personal obligation, whereas **have to** normally means that the obligation is external.

- *I **must** give up smoking.* (I need to, I say so)
- *I **have to** give up smoking.* (I'm obliged. My doctor says so)

In informal English can also use **'ve got to** to express obligation (⇒ *I've got to be there before ten.*

In the past, we use **had to** in every instance.

- *I had to give up smoking.* (because I needed to, or because my doctor forced me to).

Mustn't / don't have to

The negative forms **mustn't** and **don't have to** are completely different. **Mustn't** is used to express prohibition (an obligation **not** to do something), whereas **don't have to** is used to express an absence of obligation.

- *You mustn't reveal where you get the information.* (=you have the obligation **not** to do it)
- *You don't have to arrive before 7.* (=you can do it, but it's not necessary, there's no obligation)

Necessity



Need to, have to, don't need to, don't have to

We use *need to/have to* or *don't need to/don't have to* + infinitive to say that something is or is not necessary.

- *We need to/have to confirm our reservations before Friday.*
- *You don't need to/don't have to believe in God to be a good person.*

Don't need to / needn't

We can use both **don't need to** or **needn't** + infinitive to say that it is unnecessary to do something. However, when we are talking about a **general necessity** (in general, not on one specific occasion), we normally use **don't need to**, and we can use both **don't need to** or **needn't** + infinitive when we are talking about a **specific necessity** (on one specific occasion).

- *The doctor said I **don't need to wear** glasses.* (In general, all the time)
- *Tell him he **doesn't need to/needn't wash** the dishes. I'll do it later.* (On one specific occasion)

Didn't need to / needn't have

When something was not necessary but **we did it**, we can use both **didn't need to** + infinitive and **needn't have** + past participle.

- *Thanks, it's very beautiful, but you **didn't need to buy/needn't have bought** anything.* (=you did it)

However, when something was not necessary and we **did not do it**, we can only use **didn't need to**.

- *I **didn't buy** any groceries because Sarah told me I **needn't have bought** anything.* ❌
- *I **didn't buy** any groceries because Sarah told me I **didn't need to buy** anything.* ✅

Be able to, be allowed to, be permitted to, be supposed / meant to, had better

PERMISSION, POSSIBILITY, & OBLIGATION

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BE ABLE TO / BE ALLOWED TO

Express permission or possibility

- ▶ We **were allowed to** eat all we wanted.
- ▶ You **won't be able to** finish in time.

ALLOWED is not common after IT IS

- ✗ It is **allowed** to use mobile phones.
- ✓ You are **allowed** to use mobile phones.
- ✓ Using mobile phones is **allowed**.

BE PERMITTED TO

Express permission or prohibition in formal or official situations

- ▶ It **is not permitted to** take photos of the archive documents.
- ▶ Picnics **are not permitted** in the park.
- ▶ Employees **are permitted to** use mobile devices.

BE SUPPOSED TO / BE MEANT TO

Express obligation or permission for actions that should or shouldn't be done

- ▶ We **are supposed/meant to** check in one hour before take-off.
- ▶ You **aren't supposed/meant to** be here.

HAD BETTER / HAD BETTER NOT

Talk about actions sb should or shouldn't do, often with a negative consequence

- ▶ We'd **better** hurry up, or we'll miss our train.
- ▶ You'd **better not** tell her you broke the vase – she'll get very mad.

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Be able to / be allowed to

We can use subject + **be able to / be allowed to** instead of **can** to express permission or possibility.

- *We **were allowed to** eat all that we wanted.*
- *You **won't be able to** finish before the deadline.*

We do NOT normally use **it + be able to/be allowed to + infinitive**.

- *It is allowed to use mobile phones.* ❌
- *You are allowed to use mobile phones.* ✅
- *Using mobile phones is allowed.* ✅

Be (not) permitted to

We can use **be (not) permitted to + infinitive** to express permission or prohibition in formal or official situations, to say what the rules or laws are. The form **it + be (not) permitted to + infinitive** can be used.

- *It is not permitted to take photos of the archive documents.*
- *Picnics are not permitted in the park.*
- *Employees are permitted to use mobile devices.*

Be supposed to / be meant to

We can also use **be supposed/meant to + infinitive** to express obligation or permission, to say what we should or shouldn't do.

- *We are supposed/meant to check in one hour before take-off.*
- *What are you doing? You aren't supposed/meant to be here.*

Had better, had better not

We use **had better + infinitive (without to)** to talk about actions we think someone should or shouldn't do. There is often a **negative result** if the action is carried out. We normally use the shortened form **'d better**, and the negative form is **'d better not** (**hadn't** is NOT used).

- *We'd better hurry up or we'll miss our train.*
- *You'd better not tell her you broke the vase -she'll get very mad.* ✅

- You *hadn't better* tell her you broke the vase. ❌

Reference:

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