

Modal Verbs: Permission, Prohibition, Obligation, No obligation

When we want to express permission, prohibition (not allowing something), obligation or no obligation we use modal verbs.

Permission – can, may, could

'Can' is most often used to ask for or give permission but 'may' and 'could' are also possible even though they are not used as often as 'can'.

Can I borrow a pen?

You can sit here, the seat is free.

Could I open the window?

May I ask a question?

Prohibition

'Can't' and 'mustn't' (must not) are used to show that something is prohibited (not allowed)

You can't go into that restaurant without a tie.

You can't drive in this country unless you are over eighteen.

You mustn't use your phone in class.

'Can't' usually gives the idea of something that is against the rules. Mustn't usually means that it is the speaker who is setting the rule.

Obligation

'Have to' and 'must' are both used to express obligation. There is a slight difference in the way that they are both used.

'Have to' shows that the obligation comes from someone else, not the speaker.

This is usually referring to a rule or law.

We have to be at the airport at least two hours before the flight.

I have to work on Saturday.

They have to wear their uniforms at school.

'Must' shows us that the obligation comes from the speaker.

I must hand in my thesis by tomorrow.

I really must call my parents.

Here is an example of the difference between 'have to' and 'must':

My doctor said that I have to stop smoking or I'll risk serious problems. (I have no choice)

I must stop smoking. It's costing me too much money. (it's my decision)

We use 'don't have to' to show that there is no obligation. You can do something if you want but it is not an obligation.

You don't have to wear a tie to go to that restaurant but it would be nice.

You didn't have to call for me. I could have got a taxi.

Students don't have to wear uniforms to school.

Now choose the correct verb for these sentences:

- 1. You ___ come to the meeting but it would help us all if you're there.

mustn't

don't have to

- 2. I can't get a connection on my phone. ___ I borrow yours?

have to

can

- 3. The rules say that you ___ only invite one guest to the club.

can

have to

4. I ____ stay on for a few hours because I'd rather work late today than over the weekend.

have to

must

• **5. There's a lot of noise coming from outside. ____ I close the window?**

Must

Could

• **6. You ____ start saving money if you want to retire early.**

have to

can

• **7. Did they tell you that you ____ come into this area. It's restricted to staff only.**

don't have to

can't

• **8. We ____ be there fifteen minutes before the concert starts.**

Can

have to