MODAL VERBS FOR CERTAINTY, PROBABILITY AND POSSIBILITY — B2 LEVEL

CEFR Level B2 | 3 Worksheets: Fine-Tuning Certainty • Speculating About the Past • Register and Writing | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Fine-Tuning Certainty

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

Reference: Beyond Must, Might and Can't

At B2, the basic modals are assumed. What distinguishes an upper-intermediate speaker is the ability to *calibrate* — to choose a form that expresses exactly the degree of confidence intended, and to use semi-modals and adverbs alongside modals.

Form	Strength & notes	Example
must / can only	Confident deduction; "can only" excludes alternatives	There **must** be a simpler explanation.
can't / couldn't	Confident negative deduction	She **can't** have meant that seriously.
will / won't	Confident prediction about the *present*	That **will** be the postman now.
may well / might well	Strengthened possibility — a likelihood	The plan **may well** succeed.
should / ought to	Expectation assuming things go normally	The flight **should** land on time.
may / might / could	Open possibility, roughly 30–50%	There **could** be a delay.
is bound to / is sure to	Semi-modal — near-inevitability	Prices are **bound to** rise.
is likely / unlikely to	Semi-modal — measured probability	The bill is **unlikely to** pass.

Adverbs matter too: definitely, almost certainly, presumably, possibly, conceivably. These can strengthen or soften a modal: "She may *possibly* object" is weaker than "She may *well* object".

Exercise A: Rank the Sentences

Put these sentences in order from MOST confident (1) to LEAST confident (7).

Rank	Sentence
____	a. The negotiations could collapse.
____	b. The negotiations are bound to collapse.
____	c. The negotiations may well collapse.
____	d. The negotiations can't collapse at this stage.
____	e. The negotiations should hold together.
____	f. The negotiations might conceivably collapse.
____	g. The negotiations are unlikely to collapse.

Exercise B: Complete the Sentences

Fill each gap with an appropriate modal or semi-modal. More than one answer may be possible.

#	Sentence
1	Nobody has replied to the invitation, so the email _____ well have gone to spam.
2	With so little rain this summer, the harvest is _____ to be poor.
3	He _____ be the manager — he's far too young for a role like that.

#	Sentence
4	The keys aren't in my bag, so I _____ have left them at the office.
5	That _____ be Sofia calling now; she said she'd ring at six.
6	The proposal is _____ to be rejected, given the committee's past decisions.
7	It _____ conceivably be a coincidence, but I very much doubt it.
8	The evidence points one way only: the fault _____ only be in the wiring.

Exercise C: Error Analysis

Identify and correct the error. Then explain the rule violated.

1. "The results mustn't be accurate — the equipment was faulty."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
2. "She might can join us later if the meeting finishes early."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
3. "They must had known about the problem before the launch."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
4. "It must be snowing last night, because the car was covered."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
5. "We needn't have booked a table, so we didn't bother."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Speculating About the Past

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

Part A – The Perfect Modal Set

Form	Meaning	Example
must have + pp	Confident deduction about the past	The door was unlocked — she **must have forgotten**.
can't / couldn't have + pp	Confident negative deduction	He **couldn't have known**; the file was sealed.
may / might / could have + pp	Past possibility, still unresolved	The signal **may have been** lost.
might well have + pp	Strong past likelihood	The delay **might well have cost** them the contract.
should / ought to have + pp	Unfulfilled expectation, often critical	The audit **should have flagged** it.
could have + pp	Unrealised past possibility or ability	They **could have intervened**, but didn't.
needn't have + pp	It was done, but it was unnecessary	We **needn't have hurried** — the train was late.
didn't need to + inf	It was unnecessary, and usually not done	We **didn't need to hurry**, so we walked.

Part B – Contrastive Pairs

Explain the difference in meaning in one sentence. Then write your own example of sentence (b).

1. (a) "You needn't have waited." / (b) "You didn't need to wait."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____
2. (a) "She may have misread the brief." / (b) "She might well have misread the brief."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____
3. (a) "The train should have arrived." / (b) "The train must have arrived."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____
4. (a) "He couldn't have finished." / (b) "He didn't have to finish."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____

Part C – The Investigation

A start-up has collapsed suddenly. Read the evidence, then write your analysis.

Evidence	Detail
Funding	A major investor withdrew three weeks before the collapse
Staff	Two senior engineers resigned in the same week, without notice
Accounts	Filed late for two years running
The product	Reviews were strong; users were still signing up
The CEO	Sold personal shares four months earlier
A rival	Launched a near-identical product at half the price

Write six sentences analysing the collapse. Use each of these once: must have, can't have, might well have, could have, should have, needn't have (or a semi-modal).

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Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Register, Reading and Extended Writing

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

Part A – Analytical Reading

Read the passage and answer the questions.

> *The decline of the high street is often blamed on online shopping, but the picture may well be more complicated. Rents rose sharply throughout the last decade, and many independent retailers simply couldn't have absorbed those increases, whatever their sales figures. Parking charges must have played a part too: several towns that scrapped them have seen footfall recover. Councils ought to have acted sooner, and their reluctance is unlikely to be forgiven quickly by the businesses that closed. Some analysts argue the shift might conceivably reverse as delivery costs rise, though few would bet on it. What can be said with confidence is that no single explanation is going to account for a change this broad.*

1. Identify **six** expressions of certainty, probability or possibility. Rank them from strongest to weakest claim.

   _____

   _____

2. The writer uses **may well** rather than **may**. What difference does "well" make?

   _____

   _____

3. Explain what **ought to have acted sooner** adds beyond simply saying the councils acted late.

   _____

   _____

4. Why does the writer choose **is unlikely to be forgiven** rather than **won't be forgiven**?

   _____

   _____

5. Rewrite the sentence about analysts to make it (a) much more confident and (b) much more cautious.

   _____

   _____

Part B – Register: Choosing the Right Tool

Modals are not the only way to express certainty. Adverbs (*presumably, arguably, conceivably*), verbs (*appear, seem, suggest, indicate*) and impersonal structures (*it is likely that, there is little doubt that*) often sound more formal — and are usually preferred in academic or professional writing.

Rewrite each sentence for the register given, replacing the modal. Then say what is gained or lost.

1. Original: "The minister must have known about the report."

   Target register: A news article that cannot state this as fact

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

2. Original: "This data might show a link between the two variables."

   Target register: A university essay

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

3. Original: "The scheme will probably fail."

   Target register: A cautious briefing for senior managers

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

4. Original: "They can't have expected that reaction."

Target register: A formal history assignment

Rewrite: _____

Gained / lost: _____

Part C – Extended Writing

Write **140–180 words** on ONE of the following. Use at least **five** different modal or semi-modal structures (underline them). Do not overclaim: match the strength of each modal to the evidence you actually have.

Topic A: Something in your town has changed for the worse in recent years. Explain what you think caused it, and how certain you are of each explanation.

Topic B: A friend has stopped replying to messages from everyone in your group. Consider the possible explanations and weigh them against each other.

My topic: ___ A ___ B

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Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 30

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — B2 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Ranking)

1 = d (can't — confident negative) · **2 = b** (bound to) · **3 = c** (may well) · **4 = e** (should) · **5 = g** (unlikely to) · **6 = a** (could) · **7 = f** (might conceivably)

> *Note: (d) and (b) point in opposite directions but are equally confident — a useful discussion point. Confidence and polarity are separate dimensions. Accept a defended reordering of e/g.*

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Gap Fill)

#	Answer	Why
1	may / might	"may well" = strong likelihood.
2	likely / bound / sure	Semi-modal of probability.
3	can't	Negative deduction from evidence.
4	must	Elimination — confident past deduction.
5	will / must	"will" for confident present prediction.
6	likely / bound	Measured prediction from precedent.
7	might / could	Remote possibility, then undercut.
8	can	"can only be" — argument from elimination.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Errors)

#	Error	Correction & rule
1	mustn't be accurate	**can't be accurate** — "mustn't" is prohibition, never negative deduction. The single most persistent error at this level.
2	might can join	**might be able to join** — English allows only one modal per verb phrase; a semi-modal carries the second meaning.
3	must had known	**must have known** — modals take the bare infinitive "have", never a finite form.
4	must be snowing last night	**must have been snowing** — past reference requires the perfect modal.
5	needn't have booked, so we didn't	**didn't need to book** — "needn't have" entails the action WAS done. The clause "so we didn't bother" contradicts it.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Contrastive Pairs)

#	Pair	Answer
1	needn't have / didn't need to	(a) You DID wait, but it was unnecessary. (b) It was unnecessary — and the normal implication is that you did not wait.
2	may have / might well have	(a) An open possibility. (b) "Well" makes it a strong likelihood — the speaker leans towards believing it.
3	should have / must have	(a) Expectation from the timetable; leaves room for failure. (b) Confident deduction — the speaker treats it as fact.
4	couldn't have / didn't have to	(a) Deduction: it was impossible for him to finish. (b) Obligation: he was not required to finish. Completely different meanings — a classic trap.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (The Investigation)

Accept any logical analysis supported by the evidence. Models:

Form	Model answer
must have	The withdrawal of the main investor must have triggered the immediate cash crisis.
can't have	The collapse can't have been caused by weak demand, since users were still signing up.
might well have	The CEO's share sale might well have signalled that insiders expected trouble.
could have	The two engineers could have left because they saw the accounts.
should have	The board should have acted when the accounts were filed late for a second year.
semi-modal	A rival at half the price was bound to erode margins eventually.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Reading)

#	Answer
1	Strongest → weakest: **couldn't have absorbed** (confident negative deduction) · **must have played a part** (confident deduction) · **is going to account for** / "can be said with confidence" (assertion) · **ought to have acted** (expectation + criticism) · **may well be** (strong likelihood) · **is unlikely to be forgiven** (low probability) · **might conceivably reverse** (remote possibility).
2	"Well" converts a bare possibility into a probability the writer leans towards. Without it, "more complicated" is merely one option among several; with it, the writer is signalling that this is their actual view.
3	It adds evaluation: the councils could reasonably have been expected to act, they did not, and they are implicitly at fault. A plain statement of lateness carries no criticism.
4	"Unlikely to" is defensible and measured — it concedes the writer cannot know. "Won't" is an unhedged prediction the evidence does not support, and would sound partisan in this register.
5	(a) More confident: "The shift will reverse as delivery costs rise." (b) More cautious: "It is conceivable, though far from established, that the shift might reverse should delivery costs rise."

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Register)

#	Model answer
1	**The minister is understood to have been aware of the report.** — Attribution replaces deduction: the paper reports the claim without endorsing it. Gains legal safety; loses directness.
2	**These data suggest a possible association between the two variables.** — In academic prose the finding does the claiming, not the writer. Gains objectivity; loses the personal stance.
3	**The scheme is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives.** — Measured and defensible. Gains accountability; loses rhetorical force.
4	**It is improbable that such a reaction was anticipated.** — Removes the conversational modal. Gains formality; loses the immediacy of the deduction.

Marking Guide — Extended Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Five or more distinct modal/semi-modal structures used accurately	0–5
Calibration	Strength of each modal matches the evidence; no overclaiming	0–4
Form	Perfect modals correct; no stacking; bare infinitive after modal	0–3
Register	Consistent and appropriate to the topic chosen	0–3

Teacher Notes — Common B2 Problems

- **"Mustn't" for negative deduction** survives well into B2 for speakers of German and the Slavic and Romance languages, whose negated necessity modal maps directly onto it. Diagnose with a quick prohibition/deduction sorting task.

- **Modal stacking** (*may can, *will must). English permits one modal per verb phrase; the second meaning must be carried by a semi-modal (be able to, have to).
- **"Couldn't have" vs "didn't have to"** — deduction versus obligation. Learners conflate them because both are "negative past could/must". Worth a dedicated contrast slot.
- **Overclaiming.** B2 writers reach for *must* and *will* where the evidence supports only *may well*. Calibration — not grammar — is the real B2→C1 gap. Mark for it explicitly.
- **Moving beyond modals.** The step towards C1 is recognising that *appear*, *suggest*, *presumably* and *it is likely that* do the same work with more weight in formal registers.