MODAL VERBS FOR CERTAINTY, PROBABILITY AND POSSIBILITY — C1 LEVEL

CEFR Level C1 | 4 Worksheets: Degrees of Certainty • Past Speculation & Register • Academic Hedging • Inference from Data | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Degrees of Certainty — Present and Future

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Reference: The Certainty Cline

At C1 level, control of basic modal meanings is assumed. This worksheet focuses on the fine gradations of epistemic strength, and on the semi-modal and adverbial resources that advanced users deploy to calibrate a claim.

Form	Strength & notes	Example
must / can only	Confident deduction — the sole available conclusion	There **must** be some misunderstanding here.
can't / couldn't	Negative deduction (never "mustn't" for certainty)	She **can't** be serious about resigning.
will / won't	Confident prediction about the present, not the future	That **will** be the courier at the door.
should / ought to	Expectation based on evidence; assumes normality	The results **should** be available by Friday.
may well / might well	Strengthened possibility — likelihood, not mere chance	The policy **may well** backfire.
may / might / could	Open possibility, roughly 30–50%	There **could** be a simpler explanation.
might just / could conceivably	Remote but non-trivial possibility	It **might just** work, against all expectation.
is bound to / is certain to	Semi-modal — near-inevitability	Costs are **bound to** rise in the second quarter.
is unlikely to / is liable to	Semi-modal — low probability / negative tendency	The scheme is **unlikely to** survive scrutiny.

Exercise A: Complete the Sentences

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

#	Sentence — fill in the gap(s)
1	Given the evidence assembled so far, there _____ be an alternative explanation — nothing else fits.
2	She _____ have received the message; the server logs show it was never delivered.
3	If the trial data hold up, the drug _____ well prove to be the most significant advance of the decade.
4	Interest rates are _____ to rise if inflation persists at this level.
5	That _____ be Professor Ellis now — she said she would arrive at four.
6	The committee _____ conceivably reverse its decision, though few observers expect it.
7	On current form, the incumbent is _____ to retain the seat, whatever the polls suggest.
8	The delay _____ to be administrative rather than technical, judging by the phrasing of the notice.

Exercise B: Error Analysis

Identify and correct the error in each sentence. Then write a brief note explaining the rule violated.

1. "He mustn't be the author of the report — the style is completely different."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
2. "The results might had been affected by the sampling method."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
3. "It must be raining yesterday, because the pitch was waterlogged."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____
4. "She may can attend the seminar if her flight arrives on time."
   Correction: _____
   Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 20

Worksheet 2: Past Speculation, Register & Nuance

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Part A – The Perfect Modal Spectrum

Perfect modals (modal + have + past participle) allow speculation about completed events. The distinctions below are frequently blurred by advanced learners.

Form	Meaning	Example
must have + pp	Confident deduction about the past	The lock was undamaged — they **must have had** a key.
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, outcome unknown	The signal **may have been** lost in transmission.
might well have + pp	Strong past likelihood	The delay **might well have cost** them the contract.
should / ought to have + pp	Unfulfilled expectation, often with criticism	The audit **should have flagged** the discrepancy.
could have + pp	Unrealised past ability or possibility	They **could have intervened**, but chose not to.
needn't have + pp	Action performed but unnecessary	We **needn't have booked** — the hall was half empty.
didn't need to + inf	Action unnecessary, and (usually) not performed	We **didn't need to book**, so we simply walked in.

Part B – Contrastive Pairs

Explain the difference in meaning between each pair in one sentence, then write an original sentence for the second item only.

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 by now." / (b) "The train must have arrived by now."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____
4. (a) "He couldn't have finished it." / (b) "He can't have finished it."
   Difference: _____
   Your sentence (b): _____

Part C – Register & Alternatives to Modals

Epistemic meaning is not carried by modals alone. Adverbs (*arguably, presumably, conceivably, ostensibly*), lexical verbs (*appear, seem, suggest, indicate*) and impersonal constructions (*it is likely that, there is little doubt that*) all encode certainty — and often carry more academic weight.

Rewrite each sentence for the register indicated, removing or replacing the modal. Then state what is gained or lost.

1. Original: "The minister must have known about the memo."
   Target register: Broadsheet news report (must avoid asserting a fact not in evidence)
   Rewrite: _____
   Gained / lost: _____
2. Original: "This data might show a link between the two variables."

Target register: Peer-reviewed journal article

Rewrite: _____

Gained / lost: _____

3. Original: "It could be that the sample was contaminated."

   Target register: Formal laboratory report

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

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

   Target register: Neutral academic history writing

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

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

   Target register: Cautious policy briefing for ministers

   Rewrite: _____

   Gained / lost: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Academic Hedging & Critical Analysis

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Part A – Analytical Reading

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow.

> *The mechanisms underlying long-term memory consolidation remain imperfectly understood. Sleep may well play a more decisive role than was assumed a generation ago, though the evidence is bound to be contested until larger longitudinal studies are completed. Certain findings can only be explained by some form of overnight reactivation; others might conceivably be artefacts of the laboratory setting. Researchers ought to have anticipated this objection, and their failure to control for it must have weakened the case considerably. What can be said with confidence is that the effect, whatever its cause, is unlikely to be trivial.*

1. Identify every modal and semi-modal expression of certainty, probability or possibility in the passage (there are at least eight). List them and rank them from strongest to weakest claim.

_____

_____

2. The writer uses **may well** rather than **may**. What is the effect of "well" here, and how would the claim change without it?

_____

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3. Explain the function of **can only be explained**. Why is this stronger than "must be explained"?

_____

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4. **Researchers ought to have anticipated this objection** — what does this construction convey beyond a statement of fact? Identify the evaluative dimension.

_____

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5. Rewrite the final sentence to make it maximally cautious, then maximally assertive, without changing the topic.

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Part B – Sentence Transformation

Rewrite each sentence according to the instruction. Do not change the core meaning.

1. Original: "I am sure the committee rejected the proposal."
   Task: Rewrite using a perfect modal of deduction.
   Rewrite: _____
2. Original: "It is possible that the readings were inaccurate, but this is not likely."
   Task: Rewrite using a single remote-possibility modal structure.
   Rewrite: _____
3. Original: "It was unnecessary for us to submit the appendix, and we did not."
   Task: Rewrite using the appropriate past form (distinguish carefully from "needn't have").
   Rewrite: _____
4. Original: "The results are almost certainly going to disappoint the sponsors."
   Task: Rewrite using a semi-modal of inevitability.
   Rewrite: _____

5. Original: "Perhaps the earlier study influenced their methodology."

Task: Rewrite using "might well have" and a formal reporting verb.

Rewrite: _____

Part C – Guided Essay Paragraph

Write a paragraph of **120–150 words** arguing one of the positions below. You must include at least **FOUR** distinct modal or semi-modal structures from Worksheets 1–2, and your register must be consistently formal-academic. Hedge every claim you cannot fully evidence.

Position A: Artificial intelligence is bound to displace more professional roles than it creates within the next two decades.

Position B: The long-term effects of social media on adolescent wellbeing cannot yet be established with any confidence.

My position: ___ A ___ B

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Word count: _____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 4: Inference, Data Interpretation & Argumentation

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Part A – Reasoning from Incomplete Evidence

A research team investigating a sudden decline in a coastal fish population has assembled the following evidence. No single explanation has been confirmed.

Evidence	Finding	Reliability
Water temperature	Risen 1.8°C above the ten-year mean	High — continuous sensor data
Industrial discharge	Two permits issued upstream in March	High — public record
Toxin screening	No contaminants above threshold detected	Moderate — single sampling round
Fishing quotas	Unchanged for four years	High — official statistics
Predator numbers	Seal population up 40%, method disputed	Low — contested survey
Local testimony	Fishers report the decline began "suddenly"	Low — anecdotal

Write six analytical sentences drawing inferences from the evidence. Apply the constraints below.

1. [Use **must have** or **can only** to draw the strongest supported deduction.]

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2. [Use **can't have** or **couldn't have** to rule out an explanation.]

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3. [Use **may well have** to advance a strong but unconfirmed hypothesis.]

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4. [Use **might conceivably** for a remote possibility worth investigating.]

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5. [Use a semi-modal (**is bound to**, **is unlikely to**) to make a prediction.]

_____

_____

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6. [Use **ought to have** or **should have** to critique the methodology.]

_____

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Part B – Adversarial Reasoning (Debate Format)

For each claim, write a two-sentence counter-argument that concedes part of the claim but challenges its certainty. Recalibrate the modality; use formal register.

1. Claim: "The temperature rise must be the cause of the decline — it is the only variable that changed significantly."

   Hint: Consider what else changed, and what "significantly" conceals.

   Counter-argument:

_____

_____

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_____

2. Claim: "The toxin screening came back clean, so pollution can't have been a factor."

   Hint: Consider the reliability column.

   Counter-argument:

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3. Claim: "Seal predation is bound to be the explanation, given a 40% population increase."

   Hint: Consider the evidential status of that figure.

   Counter-argument:

_____

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Part C – Extended Writing Task

Write a discursive essay introduction (**180–220 words**) on the following proposition:

"In an age of abundant data, the confident assertion has become more dangerous than the honest admission of uncertainty."

Requirements: Use at least five distinct modal or semi-modal structures of certainty, probability or possibility (underline them). Maintain a formal-academic register. Your introduction must present the proposition, acknowledge its complexity, and clearly signal your line of argument.

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Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C1 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Gap Fill)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	there ___ be an alternative explanation	**can't / couldn't** — negative deduction; "mustn't" is not available for certainty
2	She ___ have received the message	**can't / couldn't have** — evidence rules it out
3	the drug ___ well prove	**may / might** — "may well" = strong likelihood
4	Interest rates are ___ to rise	**bound / certain / likely** — semi-modal of inevitability
5	That ___ be Professor Ellis now	**will / must** — "will" for confident present prediction
6	The committee ___ conceivably reverse	**could / might** — remote possibility
7	the incumbent is ___ to retain the seat	**likely / bound / certain**
8	The delay ___ to be administrative	**appears / seems / would appear** — lexical alternative to a modal

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Error Analysis)

#	Error	Answer / guidance
1	"mustn't be the author"	WRONG: "mustn't" expresses prohibition, never negative deduction. Correct: **can't / couldn't be**
2	"might had been affected"	WRONG: modals take the bare infinitive "have", never "had". Correct: **might have been**
3	"must be raining yesterday"	WRONG: past reference requires the perfect modal. Correct: **must have been raining**
4	"may can attend"	WRONG: modals cannot stack. Correct: **may be able to attend**

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Contrastive Pairs)

#	Pair	Answer / guidance
1	needn't have / didn't need to	(a) You DID wait, but it was unnecessary. (b) It was unnecessary, and normally implies you did not wait.
2	may have / might well have	(a) Open possibility. (b) "Well" raises it to a strong likelihood — the speaker leans toward believing it.
3	should have / must have	(a) Expectation based on schedule; leaves room for failure. (b) Confident deduction — the speaker treats it as fact.
4	couldn't have / can't have	Both negative deduction. "Can't have" is anchored to present evidence; "couldn't have" is slightly more remote or tentative, and is required after past reporting verbs.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Register)

Accept any register-appropriate rewrite that preserves epistemic strength. Sample answers:

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	Minister / news report	The minister is understood to have been aware of the memo. — Attribution replaces deduction; the paper reports the claim without endorsing it, reducing legal exposure.
2	Data / journal article	These data suggest a possible association between the two variables. — Lexical hedging ("suggest", "possible") is preferred to modals in academic prose; the finding, not the writer, does the claiming.
3	Contamination / lab report	Contamination of the sample cannot be excluded. — Impersonal negative construction; standard scientific caution.

#	Item	Answer / guidance
4	Reaction / history writing	It is improbable that such a reaction was anticipated. — Removes the conversational modal; gains formality, loses the immediacy of the deduction.
5	Scheme / policy briefing	The scheme is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives. — "Unlikely to" is measurably more defensible than "will probably fail"; loses force, gains accountability.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Passage Analysis)

#	Question	Answer / guidance
Q1	Modals identified & ranked	Strongest → weakest: **can only be explained** (certainty) > **must have weakened** (confident deduction) > **is bound to be contested** (near-inevitability) > **ought to have anticipated** (expectation + criticism) > **may well play** (strong likelihood) > **is unlikely to be trivial** (low probability, negated) > **might conceivably be** (remote possibility). Also: "can be said with confidence" (assertion of certainty).
Q2	"may well" vs "may"	"Well" converts a bare possibility into a probability the writer leans toward. Without it, the claim is neutral — sleep is merely one candidate among many.
Q3	"can only be explained"	It excludes all alternatives, whereas "must be explained" merely asserts the writer's confidence in one. "Can only" is an argument from elimination; it is stronger because it makes a claim about the evidence itself, not the speaker's belief.
Q4	"ought to have anticipated"	Adds an evaluative/critical dimension: the expectation was reasonable, it was unmet, and the researchers are implicitly at fault. Deontic colouring bleeds into an epistemic passage.
Q5	Rewrite final sentence	Maximally cautious: "It might conceivably be the case that the effect is non-trivial, though this remains to be established." Maximally assertive: "The effect, whatever its cause, is certainly substantial."

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Sentence Transformation)

Accept all accurate responses conveying the target structure. Model answers:

#	Task	Answer / guidance
1	Perfect modal of deduction	The committee must have rejected the proposal.
2	Remote possibility	The readings might conceivably have been inaccurate. (or: could just have been)
3	"didn't need to" vs "needn't have"	We didn't need to submit the appendix. — Correct because the action was NOT performed; "needn't have submitted" would wrongly imply we did.
4	Semi-modal of inevitability	The results are bound to disappoint the sponsors.
5	"might well have" + reporting verb	The earlier study might well have informed / shaped their methodology.

Worksheet 4 – Part A (Inference Sentences)

Model answers (accept any accurate, register-appropriate alternative):

#	Constraint	Answer / guidance
1	must have / can only	Since quotas have been unchanged for four years, the decline can only be attributable to an environmental rather than a regulatory factor.
2	can't have / couldn't have	Fishing pressure can't have driven the decline, as quotas have remained constant throughout the period.
3	may well have	The 1.8°C rise may well have exceeded the species' thermal tolerance, given the timing of the decline.
4	might conceivably	The March discharge permits might conceivably have introduced a contaminant that the single screening round failed to capture.
5	Semi-modal prediction	Without further sampling, the causal question is unlikely to be resolved this season.

#	Constraint	Answer / guidance
6	ought to have / should have	The team ought to have conducted repeated toxin screenings; a single round should not have been treated as conclusive.

Worksheet 4 – Part B (Adversarial Reasoning)

#	Claim	Model counter-argument
1	Temperature must be the cause	The thermal data are certainly the most reliable in the set, and the rise may well have contributed materially. It cannot, however, be the only variable that changed: two discharge permits were issued in March, so the temperature hypothesis ought to be treated as leading rather than established.
2	Clean screening ⇒ can't have been pollution	The screening result does make acute contamination less probable. A single sampling round of moderate reliability cannot rule out an intermittent discharge, however, so pollution might conceivably remain a factor.
3	Seal predation is bound to be it	Predation is unquestionably a plausible mechanism, and a 40% increase would be difficult to dismiss. The survey method is disputed, though, so the figure may well be an artefact — the hypothesis can hardly be described as bound to be correct on such evidence.

Marking Rubric — Extended Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C, Worksheet 4 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Modal Range	Uses 4–5 distinct modal/semi-modal structures accurately	0–4
Calibration	Epistemic strength matches the evidence available; no overclaiming	0–3
Register	Consistently formal-academic; hedging appropriate to genre	0–3
Accuracy	No errors in modal form (bare infinitive, perfect modals, no stacking)	0–2
Coherence	Ideas logically sequenced; modality serves the argument	0–3

Teacher Notes — Common C1 Pitfalls

- **"Mustn't" for negative deduction** — the single most persistent error. English uses *can't / couldn't*; many L1s (including German, Slavic and Romance languages) map their negated necessity modal directly onto "mustn't", producing a prohibition reading.
- **Modal stacking** (*may can, *will must) — English permits only one modal per verb phrase; a semi-modal must carry the second meaning (*may be able to*, *will have to*).
- **"Might had" / "must had"** — modals take the bare infinitive *have*, never a finite form.
- **"Needn't have" vs "didn't need to"** — the former entails the action occurred; the latter usually entails it did not. Worth explicit contrastive drilling.
- **Over-reliance on modals in academic writing** — at C1, learners should be moving toward lexical and impersonal hedging (*appear, suggest, it is likely that*), which carry more weight in formal genres.
- **"Should" as expectation vs obligation** — ambiguity is real and context-dependent; encourage learners to disambiguate with adverbs (*presumably, in principle*) where the reading matters.