Modal Verbs for Certainty, Probability and Possibility — C2

CEFR Level C2 | 3 Worksheets: Marked Forms & Scope • Register, Genre and Voice • Literary and Rhetorical Analysis | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Marked Forms and the Architecture of Modality

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

Reference: What Remains at C2

At C2 the entire modal inventory is assumed. What is left is the marked, the archaic, the idiomatic, and the theoretically interesting: forms that are rare enough to be stylistically loaded, and distinctions that even educated native speakers apply inconsistently.

Form	Notes	Example
epistemic *shall*	Archaic/legal; survives in proverbs and statute	Ask, and it **shall** be given you.
must needs* / *needs must	Archaic emphatic necessity; now self-consciously literary	He **must needs** interrupt at the worst moment.
***may* + concessive**	Concessive, not possibility — "granted that"	He **may** be clever, but he is no diplomat.
***might have been* (counterfactual)**	Unrealised past — distinct from past possibility	She **might have been** a great pianist.
***will have* + pp**	Deduction about a completed event ("future perfect" misnamed)	You **will have noticed** the discrepancy.
***would* + pp (epistemic)**	Tentative deduction; softer than *will have*	That **would have been** in the spring of 1998.
***can* (existential)**	Generic possibility, not ability — no *may here	Winters **can** be brutal in this valley.
cannot but* / *could not help but	Formal inevitability of response	One **cannot but** admire the audacity.
***be to* + inf**	Arranged/destined; in past = unrealised or fated	She **was to** die before the book appeared.
***should* (putative)**	Non-epistemic; after strange/odd that…	It is odd that he **should** say so.

Exercise A: Identify the Modality

For each sentence, state (i) whether the modal is epistemic, deontic, dynamic, or concessive, and (ii) whether a paraphrase with a "standard" modal is available without loss.

1. "You will have gathered by now that I disagree."
   Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____
   Comment: _____
2. "He may be the finest cellist of his generation, but the recording is a disaster."
   Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____
   Comment: _____
3. "It is remarkable that she should have noticed at all."
   Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____
   Comment: _____
4. "The expedition was to end in disaster three weeks later."
   Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____
   Comment: _____
5. "Accidents can happen even to the most careful technician."

Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____

Comment: _____

6. "One could not help but wonder what the committee was thinking."

Type: _____ Paraphrase available? _____

Comment: _____

Exercise B: Scope and Ambiguity

Modals interact with negation and quantifiers in ways that generate systematic ambiguity. Consider *"All the samples may not be contaminated."* — this can mean "it is possible that none are" (modal over negation) or "not all are necessarily" (negation over modal).

For each sentence, give both readings and identify which is dominant in neutral speech. Then disambiguate each reading with a rewrite.

1. "Everyone might not have received the memo."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

2. "You can't always be right."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

3. "The minister must not have been informed."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

4. "Both proposals cannot succeed."

Reading A: _____

Reading B: _____

Dominant + disambiguation: _____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 2: Register, Genre and Voice

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

Part A – The Same Proposition, Nine Ways

An advanced writer chooses modality to position themselves relative to a claim, an audience, and a body of evidence. The proposition below is constant; only the epistemic packaging changes.

Proposition: the drug trial's negative result was caused by the dosing protocol.

Render the proposition in each register below. Do not repeat a structure.

1. A press release from the company that funded the trial

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

2. A letter to *The Lancet* from an independent researcher

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

3. A tabloid headline and standfirst

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

4. An internal memo from the trial's statistician to the board

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

5. A regulator's formal finding

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

6. A rival lab's conference abstract

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

7. A popular science podcast script

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

8. A defence barrister's closing statement in a negligence case

   _____

   Modality chosen and why: _____

Part B – Diagnosing Voice

Read the two extracts. Both concern the same event. Analyse how modality constructs the writer's stance, and what each writer is trying to make the reader do.

> ***Extract 1:*** *"The bridge cannot have failed through design error alone. Loads of this order were anticipated; the calculations, which I have seen, are sound. Something else must have been at work, and the inquiry ought to have said so."*

> ***Extract 2:*** *"It may be that design error played some part. The loads might conceivably have exceeded projections, though the calculations appear sound. The inquiry could perhaps have gone further."*

Analysis: _____

_____

____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Now rewrite Extract 2 so that it makes the same accusation as Extract 1 while remaining formally hedged — that is, deniable on the page but unmistakable to the reader.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part C – Translation Trap

Modal systems map poorly across languages. Each sentence below is a plausible calque from another language — grammatical in English, but conveying something other than the writer intended.

Identify the unintended meaning, diagnose the likely intended meaning, and correct it.

1. "The results must not be significant." *(intended: I am sure they are not significant)*
   Unintended reading: _____
   Correction: _____
2. "He should be arriving at six." *(intended: he is obliged to arrive at six)*
   Unintended reading: _____
   Correction: _____
3. "You could have told me!" *(intended: it was possible for you to tell me — a neutral statement)*
   Unintended reading: _____
   Correction: _____
4. "She may not attend the ceremony." *(intended: it is possible she will not attend)*
   Unintended reading: _____
   Correction: _____
5. "I must have my keys somewhere." *(intended: I am sure my keys are somewhere here)*
   Unintended reading: _____
   Correction: _____

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: the narrator's voice and the character's thought are deliberately fused.

> *She would have been forty that spring, or near enough; the parish register might have settled it, had the vestry not burned. He must have known, of course — a man in his position could hardly not have known — and yet he said nothing, and perhaps there was nothing he could have said that would not have made it worse. It may be that he was kind. It may equally be that he was a coward, and that the two shall never be disentangled now, whatever the biographers should choose to claim.*

1. Identify every modal expression. Classify each as epistemic, counterfactual, concessive, or putative.

_____

_____

2. **"She would have been forty"** — is this epistemic deduction or counterfactual? Justify your reading, then argue the opposite case.

_____

_____

3. **"could hardly not have known"** — unpack this double negative. Why not simply "must have known"? What does the litotes achieve that the direct form would not?

_____

_____

4. The passage moves from **must have** to **it may be** to **shall**. Trace this arc. What is happening to the narrator's authority across the passage?

_____

_____

5. **"whatever the biographers should choose to claim"** — identify this use of *should*. Why is it not an obligation, and what attitude does it encode?

_____

_____

6. The passage never states what "it" was. Explain how the modality alone constructs the scandal without the narrator committing to it.

_____

_____

Part B – Pastiche

Write a passage of 100–130 words in free indirect style, in which a narrator reconstructs an event they did not witness. The narrator must grow steadily less certain as the passage proceeds. Use at least six distinct modal structures, including one counterfactual and one marked or archaic form.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

Structures used: ________

Part C – Critical Essay

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

Topic A: "The hedge is not a weakness of academic prose but its central ethical instrument." Discuss.

Topic B: "English has no future tense — only modality pointing forwards." Evaluate this claim.

Topic C: Litotes and the double negative ("not unreasonable", "could hardly not have known") are often condemned as evasive. Defend them.

My topic: ___ A ___ B ___ C

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

____
____

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	will have gathered	**Epistemic**. Deduction about a completed event, not a future one. Paraphrase "must have gathered" is close but more forceful; *will have* flatters the reader by presuming their competence.
2	may be the finest	**Concessive**, not epistemic — it grants the point in order to overturn it. "Granted, he is the finest…" is the paraphrase. Note the obligatory *but*: without it the concessive reading collapses into possibility.
3	should have noticed	**Putative** *should* — carries no obligation and no deduction. It marks the clause as an object of the speaker's emotional reaction. Paraphrase with the indicative ("that she noticed") loses the note of surprise.
4	was to end	**Epistemic/narrative** — retrospective fatality. The event is certain (it happened); *be to* encodes the narrator's hindsight. No modal paraphrase preserves this: "ended" is flat, "would end" is close but less fated.
5	can happen	**Dynamic/existential** — generic possibility. Crucially *may* is impossible here: *"Accidents may happen even to…" shifts to epistemic. A genuine gap in the system.
6	could not help but wonder	**Dynamic** — inevitability of an involuntary response. Formal and slightly arch. "Inevitably wondered" is the paraphrase; the modal version foregrounds the speaker's resistance.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Scope and Ambiguity)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	Everyone might not have received	A: ¬∀ — "it is possible that not everyone received it" (negation under the quantifier). B: ∀¬ — "for each person, it is possible they did not receive it". **A dominant.** Disambiguate: "Not everyone will necessarily have received it" vs "It is possible that nobody received it".
2	You can't always be right	A: 'It is not possible for you to be right on every occasion' (¬■∀ — the natural reading). B: 'On some occasions, it is impossible for you to be right' (∀¬■ — vanishingly rare). **A dominant.** The idiom is effectively frozen; B requires heavy contextual support.
3	must not have been informed	A: **Epistemic** — "I deduce he was not informed" (US English readily; increasingly accepted in BrE). B: **Deontic** — "it was required that he not be informed". **A dominant in AmE, B is a live reading in formal BrE** — a genuine transatlantic split worth teaching. Disambiguate with "can't have been informed" (epistemic) or "was not to be informed" (deontic).
4	Both proposals cannot succeed	A: ¬■(both) — "it is impossible for both to succeed" (one may). B: ■¬ for each — "neither can succeed". **A dominant**, but B is readily available and the sentence is a genuine trap in technical writing. Disambiguate: "The two proposals cannot both succeed" vs "Neither proposal can succeed".

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Nine Registers)

Assess the *fit* between modality and genre, not correctness. Models:

Register	Model + rationale
Press release	"The result may reflect factors unrelated to the compound itself, including protocol design." — Maximum distance; the agent vanishes; *may* opens a door without walking through it.
Lancet letter	"The dosing protocol must surely be considered before the compound is abandoned." — *must surely*: confident but collegial; the hedge is a courtesy to peers, not evasion.
Tabloid	"DRUG FIASCO: they must have known. Bosses could have halted the trial months ago, insiders claim." — *must have* as accusation; *could have* to imply culpability; attribution ("claim") carries the legal weight.
Internal memo	"The effect is almost certainly protocol-driven; I can see no other reading of the variance." — Bare confidence. Internal registers hedge least, because the audience shares the evidence.

Register	Model + rationale
Regulator's finding	"The Authority is satisfied that the protocol was the proximate cause." — Modality replaced by a performative. Regulators do not deduce; they find. A key C2 insight.
Rival abstract	"These data would appear to be consistent with a protocol effect." — *would appear*: maximal deniability while planting the flag. The most passive-aggressive structure in academic English.
Podcast	"So the dosing might just be the whole story here — and if it is, that's a big deal." — *might just*: conversational, dramatises the possibility.
Barrister	"It cannot be said that my client must have foreseen this." — Note the stacked negation over a modal: the standard of proof, not the fact, is the target.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Diagnosing Voice)

Analysis. Extract 1 uses *cannot have*, *must have* and *ought to have* — deduction plus criticism. The writer claims first-hand knowledge ("which I have seen") and converts it into authority; the reader is positioned to accept a finding. Extract 2 uses *may be*, *might conceivably*, *appear*, *could perhaps* — every claim is retractable. The writer positions themselves as a cautious observer, and the reader is invited to weigh rather than accept. Note that Extract 2 is not more honest: hedging can be a rhetorical strategy for insinuating without committing.

Rewrite model (hedged but unmistakable): "One would hesitate to suggest that design error alone could account for a failure of this kind. It may be that the calculations were sound; if so, the question of what else might have been at work can hardly be said to have been settled by the inquiry." — The accusation is intact. Every clause is deniable. This is the target skill: *hedging as weapon*.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (Translation Traps)

#	Unintended reading	Correction & diagnosis
1	Deontic prohibition: "it is forbidden for the results to be significant"	**"The results can't be significant."** The classic L1 transfer from German (*müssen nicht*) and the Romance languages. Note that AmE tolerates the epistemic reading, which is precisely why it is dangerous in international writing.
2	Epistemic expectation: "I expect he will arrive at six"	**"He is to arrive at six." / "He is required to arrive at six."** *Should* is ambiguous between weak obligation and expectation; the progressive tips it decisively toward expectation.
3	Reproach: "you failed to tell me and I resent it"	**"You would have been able to tell me." / "It was open to you to tell me."** *Could have* + emphasis is idiomatically a reproach; the neutral reading is almost unrecoverable in speech.
4	Deontic permission withheld: "she is not permitted to attend"	**"She might not attend." / "It is possible that she will not attend."** *May not* is genuinely ambiguous; *might not* is unambiguously epistemic. A rare case where the "weaker" form is the precise one.
5	Deontic/possessive: "I am obliged to have my keys"	**"My keys must be here somewhere."** The problem is *have*: with a possessive complement, *must* defaults to obligation. Restructure so the modal takes *be*.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Close Reading)

#	Answer / guidance
1	**would have been** (epistemic or counterfactual — ambiguous, see Q2) · **might have settled** (counterfactual: the register burned) · **must have known** (epistemic) · **could hardly not have known** (epistemic, litotes) · **could have said** (counterfactual) · **it may be** ×2 (epistemic) · **shall** (archaic epistemic/fated) · **should choose** (putative).
2	Epistemic reading: the narrator calculates her age from records — "she would have been forty by then". Counterfactual reading: she died before that spring, so she never reached forty. The following clause ("the parish register might have settled it") supports the **epistemic** reading — you do not consult a register to confirm a counterfactual. But the counterfactual reading is available and the ambiguity is almost certainly deliberate: it seeds the death before the narrator admits to it. Reward students who see that the ambiguity *is* the answer.

#	Answer / guidance
3	Litotes: "could hardly not have known" = "must have known", but routed through a double negative. It achieves three things the direct form cannot: (i) it mimics the reluctance of the thinker, who does not want to conclude this; (ii) it is formally weaker and therefore deniable; (iii) it slows the sentence, enacting the reasoning rather than reporting it. "Must have known" asserts; this *deduces in front of the reader*.
4	The arc is a controlled collapse of authority. **Must have** claims access to another mind. **Could hardly not have** already concedes that the access is inferential. **It may be… it may equally be** abandons adjudication entirely — and the parallel structure ("kind"/"coward") refuses to rank them. **Shall** then converts the failure into permanence: not "will never" (prediction) but *shall* never (something closer to decree). The narrator ends by claiming a different authority — over the future of the question rather than the facts of the past.
5	Putative *should*. It is not an obligation on the biographers; it marks their claims as hypothetical and, by the choice of *choose*, as wilful. The attitude encoded is dismissive: whatever they may opt to assert is pre-emptively framed as choice rather than finding.
6	The scandal exists entirely in the presuppositions the modals carry. "He must have known" presupposes there was something to know. "A man in his position" presupposes the knowledge was institutionally available. "Nothing he could have said that would not have made it worse" presupposes damage. The narrator asserts none of it. This is the mechanism of literary insinuation, and the reason modality is inseparable from ethics in narrative.

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

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures including counterfactual and a marked form	0–5
Control of arc	Certainty rises or falls as required; the gradient is deliberate, not accidental	0–5
Register integrity	No leakage between narratorial voice and character thought unless intended	0–4
Precision	Every modal is the only one that would do; no default reaching for must/might	0–4
Argument (Part C)	Position defended with linguistic evidence; the candidate's own modality is calibrated	0–5

Teacher Notes — C2

- **The C1→C2 shift is from accuracy to motivation.** C1 candidates use the right modal. C2 candidates can say why no other modal would have done, and what a different choice would have cost. Mark for the second thing.
- **Scope ambiguity is the most under-taught area in advanced English.** "Everyone might not have received it" is a genuine trap that reaches print regularly. Formal-logic notation (■¬ vs ¬■) helps analytic learners and alienates others — offer it, don't impose it.
- **The *must not* transatlantic split is real.** AmE readily reads "He must not have known" epistemically; conservative BrE resists. Do not mark either as an error; teach the ambiguity as a hazard of international writing.
- **Marked forms need a licence.** *Must needs*, epistemic *shall*, *cannot but* — learners who deploy these unearned sound like a bad pastiche of Trollope. Insist on a reason for every marked form.
- **Hedging is not politeness.** The Worksheet 2 Part B rewrite is the key exercise in this set: it teaches that hedges can carry an accusation more effectively than an assertion, because the reader completes it themselves. Learners raised on "hedging = academic caution" find this genuinely destabilising, which is the point.
- **Free indirect style is the hardest test** of modal control in the language, because the modality must belong simultaneously to two voices. If a candidate can sustain it for 120 words, their modal system is native-equivalent.