# Modal Verbs for Permission — Asking, Giving and Refusing — A2

CEFR Level A2 | 3 Worksheets: Can, Could and May • The Softening Formula • Reading and Role-play | Answer Key Included

## Worksheet 1: Can, Could and May

*Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: A2 (CEFR)*

### Reference: Three Ways to Ask

You know **Can I…?** Now we add two more. They ask the same thing — but they are not for the same people.

| Form | Who do you say this to? | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Can I…?** | Friends, family, classmates. Everyday. | **Can I** borrow your charger? |
| **Could I…?** | A teacher, a shop assistant, someone you don't know. More polite. | **Could I** ask you a question? |
| **May I…?** | Very formal: a job interview, a very polite situation. | **May I** come in? |

**Careful! *Could* here is <u>not</u> the past. "Could I sit here?" is about now — it is just more polite than "Can I".**

**The answer is always *can*: "Could I sit here?" → "Yes, of course you can." (✗ "Yes, you could.")**

### Exercise A: Who Are You Talking To?

**Circle the best form for each person.**

1. Your best friend, about their pen: **Can I** / **May I** borrow this?
2. A police officer: **Can I** / **Could I** ask you something?
3. Your little brother: **Can I** / **May I** have one of your sweets?
4. A hotel receptionist: **Can I** / **Could I** have my key, please?
5. At a job interview: **Can I** / **May I** sit down?
6. Your classmate: **Could I** / **Can I** see your notes?

### Exercise B: Make It More Polite

**Rewrite each question to be more polite.**

1. "Give me the salt." → _____
2. "I want to use your phone." → _____
3. "Open the window." → _____
4. "I sit here?" → _____
5. "Tell me the time." → _____

### Exercise C: Complete with can, could or may

| # | Sentence |
|---|---|
| **1** | "_____ I speak to Mr Adams, please?" (on the phone, formal) |
| **2** | "_____ I have a crisp?" (your friend's crisps) |
| **3** | "Yes, of course you _____ ." (answering someone) |
| **4** | "_____ I leave early today, please?" (asking your boss) |
| **5** | "You _____ take photos here, but no flash." (a museum rule) |
| **6** | "_____ I help you?" (a shop assistant to a customer) |

***Score: _____ / 20***

# Worksheet 2: Saying No — The Softening Formula

*Name:* _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: A2 (CEFR)*

## Reference: English Almost Never Says "No"

A direct "no" sounds rude in English. We use a **formula** with three or four parts.

| Part | What it does | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Sorry** | Softens the "no" | Sorry… / I'm afraid… / Sorry about that… |
| **2. The refusal** | The actual "no" | you can't / I can't / that's not possible |
| **3. The reason** | Shows it is not personal | I'm using it / it's not mine / we're closing |
| **4. The offer** | Gives something back (optional) | but you can… / maybe later? / try the one over there |

**Put it together: "Can I borrow your car?" → "Sorry, you can't — I need it this evening. But you can take my bike if you like."**

**"I'm afraid" is very common and very useful. It does not mean you are frightened! It means "I'm sorry to tell you this".**

## Exercise A: Find the Parts

**Read each refusal. Write which parts it has: 1 (sorry), 2 (refusal), 3 (reason), 4 (offer).**

| # | Refusal | Parts |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | "No." | _____ |
| **2** | "Sorry, you can't." | _____ |
| **3** | "I'm afraid the kitchen is closed, but the bar is still open." | _____ |
| **4** | "Sorry, I can't — I'm using it right now." | _____ |
| **5** | "I'm afraid not. We close at six. Try again tomorrow?" | _____ |

## Exercise B: Build the Refusal

**Write a full refusal with sorry + refusal + reason + offer.**

| # | Question | Your refusal |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | "Can I borrow your laptop tonight?" | _____ |
| **2** | "Could I take this chair?" | _____ |
| **3** | "May I park here?" | _____ |
| **4** | "Can I pay by card?" | _____ |
| **5** | "Could I have Friday off?" | _____ |

## Exercise C: Too Rude!

**These refusals are all grammatically correct — but too rude. Rewrite them politely.**

1. "No, you can't."
   → _____
2. "That's impossible."
   → _____
3. "No. Why do you want it?"
   → _____
4. "You can't. It's the rule."

→ _____

***Score: _____ / 25***

# Worksheet 3: Reading, Role-play and Writing

*Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: A2 (CEFR)*

## Part A – Reading

**Read the text and answer the questions.**

> *Yusuf started his new job at a hotel on Monday. He was nervous, so he asked a lot of questions. "May I ask where the staff room is?" he said to the manager. "Of course you can," she said. "And you can call me Rita — you don't have to say 'may I' to me!" Later, a guest asked Yusuf: "Could I have a room with a view of the sea?" Yusuf checked the computer. "I'm afraid all the sea rooms are full tonight," he said, "but I can give you a garden room, and I can move you tomorrow if you like." The guest smiled. "That's very kind." Rita told Yusuf later: "That was perfect. You said no, but the guest was happy."*

1. Why did Yusuf say "**May I** ask…"? Was it the right choice?

   _____

2. What did Rita mean when she said "you don't have to say 'may I' to me"?

   _____

3. Find the guest's question. Which form did they use, and why?

   _____

4. How did Yusuf refuse the guest? Write the three parts of his refusal.

   _____

5. Why was the guest happy, even though the answer was "no"?

   _____

## Part B – Role-play

**Work with a partner. Student A asks; Student B refuses politely with a reason and an offer. Then swap.**

| # | Student A: you want to… | Student B: you are… |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | borrow your friend's bike for the weekend | their friend — you need it on Saturday |
| **2** | sit at a table in a busy café | a waiter — the table is reserved |
| **3** | leave school early | the teacher — there is a test at three |
| **4** | take a photo inside a museum | a guard — photos are not allowed in this room |

## Part C – Writing

Write a short conversation (**60–80 words**) between a customer and a shop assistant. The customer asks for **three** things. The assistant says **yes** to one and **no** to two — politely, with reasons.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Word count: _____

***Score: _____ / 20***

# Answer Key & Teacher Notes

*For teacher use only — A2 Level Worksheets*

## Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (Who Are You Talking To?)

| # | Answer | Why |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | Can I | A best friend — "May I" would sound strange, even sarcastic. |
| **2** | Could I | A stranger with authority — polite but not stiff. |
| **3** | Can I | A little brother. Nothing formal needed. |
| **4** | Could I | A service situation — "could" is the everyday polite default. |
| **5** | May I | A job interview — the most formal context here. |
| **6** | Can I | A classmate — "could" is not wrong, just slightly distant. |

*Teaching point: none of these are grammar errors. Choosing wrongly is a social mistake, not a linguistic one — which is exactly why it matters.*

## Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Make It More Polite)

| # | Model answer |
|---|---|
| **1** | Could I have the salt, please? / Could you pass me the salt, please? |
| **2** | Could I use your phone, please? |
| **3** | Could I open the window? / Can I open the window, please? |
| **4** | Could I sit here, please? |
| **5** | Could you tell me the time, please? |

## Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Gap Fill)

| # | Answer | Why |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | Could / May | Formal phone call. |
| **2** | Can | A friend — everyday. |
| **3** | can | The answer is always *can*, never *could*. |
| **4** | Could / May | Asking your boss — polite. |
| **5** | can | Giving permission (a rule), not asking. |
| **6** | Can / May | "Can I help you?" is the standard shop phrase; "May I help you?" is more formal but common. |

## Worksheet 2 – Exercise A (Find the Parts)

| # | Parts | Comment |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | 2 only | A bare refusal. Grammatically fine, socially unusable. |
| **2** | 1 + 2 | Better, but the missing reason makes it sound personal. |
| **3** | 1 + 3 + 4 | Note: no explicit refusal! "The kitchen is closed" IS the no. Very natural. |
| **4** | 1 + 2 + 3 | The standard, complete refusal. |
| **5** | 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 | All four parts. "I'm afraid not" is a compact refusal. |

*Item 3 is the interesting one — in real English the refusal is often left out entirely, because the reason implies it. Learners who notice this are ahead.*

## Worksheet 2 – Exercise B (Build the Refusal)

Accept any complete, polite refusal. Models:

| # | Model answer |
|---|---|
| **1** | Sorry, you can't — I need it for an essay tonight. But you can borrow it tomorrow if you like. |
| **2** | I'm afraid that one's taken, but there's a free one by the window. |
| **3** | Sorry, you can't park here — it's for deliveries. There's a car park just round the corner. |
| **4** | I'm afraid we don't take cards for under ten euros, but there's a cash machine next door. |
| **5** | Sorry, you can't — we're short-staffed on Friday. Could you take Monday instead? |

## Worksheet 2 – Exercise C (Too Rude!)

| # | Rude version | Polite rewrite & why |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | "No, you can't." | "Sorry, you can't — I'm using it at the moment." The reason is what removes the sting. |
| **2** | "That's impossible." | "I'm afraid that's not possible today, but we could try on Thursday?" — "I'm afraid" + an alternative. |
| **3** | "No. Why do you want it?" | "Sorry, not right now — is it urgent?" The original demands justification, which reverses the politeness. |
| **4** | "You can't. It's the rule." | "I'm afraid we're not allowed to, sorry — it's a fire regulation." Naming the rule's source shows it isn't personal. |

## Worksheet 3 – Part A (Reading)

| # | Answer |
|---|---|
| **1** | He was nervous and it was his first day, so he chose the most formal form. It was not wrong — but it was too formal for a colleague, which is why Rita corrected him. |
| **2** | She meant he could be less formal with her — "can" is enough between colleagues. She was telling him they are equals, not that "may" is incorrect. |
| **3** | "Could I have a room with a view of the sea?" — *Could*, because the guest is speaking to a member of staff they don't know: polite, but not stiff. |
| **4** | (1) "I'm afraid" = sorry. (2) "all the sea rooms are full tonight" = the reason (and the refusal itself). (3) "but I can give you a garden room, and I can move you tomorrow" = the offer. Note he never actually said "no" or "you can't". |
| **5** | Because the refusal was not about the guest — the reason was external (the rooms are full), and Yusuf offered two alternatives. The guest was refused but not rejected. |

## Marking Guide — Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

| Criterion | Descriptor | Marks |
|---|---|---|
| **Forms** | Uses can / could / may appropriately for a customer–assistant setting | 0–3 |
| **Refusals** | Both refusals include a reason; at least one includes an offer | 0–4 |
| **Register** | Consistent shop register; no rudeness, no over-formality | 0–3 |

## Teacher Notes — A2

- **"Could" is not the past here.** Learners meet *could* as the past of *can* ("I could swim at five"), then meet "Could I…?" and assume it means "was I allowed to?". Separate the two explicitly, or the confusion persists to B1.
- **The answer is always *can*.** "Could I sit here?" → "Yes, you can." Not "Yes, you could." Learners mirror the question form and produce something that sounds hypothetical. Drill the mismatch.
- **"I'm afraid" is the highest-value phrase on this worksheet.** It is the standard English refusal opener, it is invisible to learners because it looks like it means fear, and it makes an A2 speaker sound markedly more competent. Teach it as one word.

- **The reason often replaces the refusal.** "I'm afraid the kitchen is closed" contains no "no" at all. This is normal, native, and worth pointing out — learners who add "you can't" to it sound heavier than they mean to.
- **Over-formality is a real error.** Learners who default to "May I" with friends sound sarcastic or servile. It is not enough to teach the polite forms; you must teach that politeness has an upper bound. The Rita line in the reading exists for exactly this.
- **Towards B1:** next comes *Do you mind if I…?* and *Would it be OK if I…?*, and the discovery that the most polite English requests contain no permission modal at all.