Modal Verbs for Permission — Asking, Giving and Refusing — C1

CEFR Level C1 | 3 Worksheets: Permission, Licence and Asymmetry • Manufactured Consent • Drafting and Argument | Answer Key Included

Worksheet 1: Permission, Licence and the Asymmetry of Asking

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

Reference: What Asking Concedes

To ask permission is to concede that the other party may refuse. This is not incidental — it is the entire content of the act. At C1 the forms are known; the work lies in what the choice of form *admits* about the relationship.

Form	What it concedes	Example
May I…?	Their authority is formal and acknowledged	**May I** approach the bench?
Could I…?	Their authority is real but unstated	**Could I** have a word?
Do you mind if I…?	Only that they might be inconvenienced	**Do you mind if I** record this?
I trust you won't mind if I…	Nothing — it presupposes consent	**I trust you won't mind if I** proceed.
I'll be taking…	Nothing. Not a request at all	**I'll be taking** Thursday, by the way.
I'm going to have to ask you to…	Reverses direction: they must comply	**I'm going to have to ask you to** leave.
You're welcome to…	Grants without being asked; asserts ownership	**You're welcome to** use the office.
Feel free to…	Grants; often pre-empts a request	**Feel free to** disagree.
If I may…	Asks and proceeds simultaneously	**If I may**, I'd like to return to the figures.
With your permission…	Formal; the permission is assumed granted	**With your permission**, I'll begin.

Note the bottom of the table. "If I may" and "With your permission" have the *grammar* of requests and the *function* of announcements. The speaker does not wait. This is not rudeness — it is a claim that the permission is a formality, which is itself a claim about status.

Exercise A: What Is Being Conceded?

For each, state (i) whether it is genuinely a request, (ii) what it concedes about the hearer's authority, and (iii) what a refusal would cost.

1. "If I may, I'd like to return to the point about funding."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____
2. "You're welcome to sit in on the interview."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____
3. "I trust there's no objection to my circulating the draft."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____
4. "I'm going to have to ask you to put that away."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____

5. "Feel free to say no."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____
6. "I don't need your permission, but I'd rather have it."
   Request? _____ Concedes: _____
   Cost of refusal: _____

Exercise B: Permission vs Right vs Ability

English uses *can* for all three, and the ambiguity is exploited constantly.

For each, identify the reading(s) available, and construct a context that forces each one.

1. "Employees can take their leave in December."
   Readings: _____
   Forcing contexts: _____
2. "You can't park there."
   Readings: _____
   Forcing contexts: _____
3. "Members may bring one guest."
   Readings: _____
   Forcing contexts: _____
4. "She couldn't leave the building."
   Readings: _____
   Forcing contexts: _____

Exercise C: Error Analysis

All are grammatical. Each fails. Diagnose and repair.

1. "May I remind you that the deadline was Tuesday." *(intended as a genuine request)*
   Failure: _____
   Repair: _____
2. "Feel free to work through the weekend." *(from a manager, on Friday)*
   Failure: _____
   Repair: _____
3. "You're welcome to appeal the decision." *(from the person who made it)*
   Failure: _____
   Repair: _____
4. "I was wondering if I might possibly be permitted to..." *(a barrister, mid-cross-examination)*
   Failure: _____
   Repair: _____
5. "Do you mind if I ask how old you are?" *(in a job interview, from the panel)*
   Failure: _____
   Repair: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 2: Manufactured Consent

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

Part A – The Request That Cannot Be Refused

Certain constructions preserve the form of a request while removing the possibility of refusal. The hearer is left having apparently consented to something they were never able to decline.

Device	Mechanism	Example
Tag on an assertion	States, then invites agreement too late to matter	I'll take Thursday, **if that's all right**?
Presupposed consent	Embeds the grant in the request	**I trust you won't mind** if I…
Post-hoc request	Asks after the act	I hope you don't mind — **I've already**…
Silence as consent	Shifts the burden to objecting	Let me know **if that's a problem**.
Volunteer framing	Converts refusal into a character failure	**No pressure**, but if anyone **would like to**…
Public request	An audience makes refusal costly	Asking in the meeting, not before it.
Bundled refusal	Refusing one thing means refusing all	You're happy with the plan, and with me presenting it?
Deadline collapse	No time remains to refuse	Sending at 4.55 for a 5pm decision.

For each scenario, write the manufactured-consent version and then the honest version. State what the first costs the hearer.

1. You want a colleague to take a task you were assigned.
   Manufactured: _____
   Honest: _____
   Cost to hearer: _____
2. You have already told a client something you had no authority to promise.
   Manufactured: _____
   Honest: _____
   Cost to hearer: _____
3. You want your team to agree to a deadline you have already accepted.
   Manufactured: _____
   Honest: _____
   Cost to hearer: _____
4. You want to record a conversation the other person would rather you didn't.
   Manufactured: _____
   Honest: _____
   Cost to hearer: _____

Part B – Analytical Reading

Read the passage and answer the questions.

> *The consent form ran to nine pages. Participants were free to withdraw at any time, it said, without giving a reason and without penalty — though it did not say, and was not required to say, that withdrawal after the third session would forfeit the payment. They were welcome to ask questions. They might, if they wished, decline any individual task. One could hardly call it coercive: every sentence granted something. And yet Reyes noticed that nobody withdrew, that nobody asked anything, and that the woman in the second cohort who declined a task was not invited back — not, of course, that she had been promised she would be. Everyone had been perfectly free, and everyone had done exactly as they were asked.*

1. Identify every permission structure. Note that all of them grant. Why is this significant?

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_____

2. "**Were free to withdraw**… **without penalty**" — reconcile this with the payment clause. Is the form lying?

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_____

3. "They **might**, if they wished, decline any individual task." Analyse the modal and the hedge. What does "if they wished" add, and what does it quietly concede?

_____

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4. "**Not, of course, that she had been promised she would be**" — identify the construction and its function. Who is speaking here?

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5. The passage ends: "Everyone had been perfectly free, and everyone had done exactly as they were asked." Explain how both halves can be true, and what the sentence is arguing.

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6. The form never prohibits anything. Explain how prohibition is achieved without a single prohibitive structure.

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Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 3: Drafting, Refusal and Argument

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

Part A – Sentence Transformation

Rewrite using the word given, between three and six words.

1. "I am not asking you; I am telling you." *(HAVE)*

   → _____

2. "You may leave whenever you wish — nobody will stop you." *(FREE)*

   → _____

3. "I assume you have no objection to my proceeding." *(TRUST)*

   → _____

4. "I would like to interrupt, with your indulgence." *(MAY)*

   → _____

5. "Nobody invited her, but she was not turned away either." *(WELCOME)*

   → _____

6. "Say no if you want to — I genuinely don't mind." *(PRESSURE)*

   → _____

7. "It is not in my power to grant that." *(MINE)*

   → _____

8. "I did it and I am informing you afterwards." *(HOPE)*

   → _____

Part B – Drafting Under Constraint

Draft each in **no more than 40 words**. The pragmatic effect must be exact.

1. A refusal to a subordinate that leaves no room for appeal, without a single harsh word.

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2. A request to a superior for something you are entitled to, without conceding that they could refuse.

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3. A grant of permission that appears generous but attaches a condition making it unusable. Then annotate: how does the grammar do the work?

_____

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4. A withdrawal of permission you granted in writing, without admitting you have changed your mind.

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Part C – Extended Writing

Write **200–250 words** on ONE of the following. Use at least **six** distinct structures (underline them). Formal-academic register.

Topic A: "Consent that cannot be withheld is not consent, whatever the grammar says." Discuss with reference to permission structures.

Topic B: "Politeness is the mechanism by which the powerful are relieved of the appearance of power." Evaluate.

Topic C: Examine the claim that *you're welcome to* and *feel free to* are not grants of permission but assertions of ownership.

My topic: ___ A ___ B ___ C

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Word count: _____ Structures used: _____ / 6

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C1 Level Worksheets

Worksheet 1 – Exercise A (What Is Being Conceded?)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	If I may…	**Not a request.** The speaker continues without pause; the subordinate clause is a courtesy, not a query. **Concedes:** that the hearer chairs the discussion — formally. **Refusal cost:** high and strange; interrupting "if I may" requires the hearer to be the aggressor. The form is a claim to be the kind of person whose requests are granted.
2	You're welcome to sit in…	**A grant, unrequested. Concedes:** nothing — it *asserts* that the speaker owns the interview and may admit whom they choose. **Refusal cost:** none for the hearer, but note the trap: declining an unrequested grant can read as a rebuff, so "you're welcome to" quietly obliges attendance.
3	I trust there's no objection…	**Formally a request; functionally an announcement.** "I trust" presupposes the answer. **Concedes:** that objection is theoretically possible. **Refusal cost:** very high — the hearer must contradict the speaker's stated trust, which reframes their refusal as a breach of relationship rather than a decision about a draft.
4	I'm going to have to ask you to…	**Not a request — an instruction wearing a request's clothes. Concedes:** nothing; the direction of authority is reversed. **Refusal cost:** escalation. Note "have to" — the speaker claims compulsion, making themselves a messenger rather than the source. This is what security staff and cabin crew are trained to say.
5	Feel free to say no.	**Ambiguous, and the ambiguity is the point.** Sincerely: it genuinely releases the hearer. Strategically: it presupposes that refusal is available and thereby makes it harder — you cannot claim to have been pressured by someone who invited you to refuse. **Refusal cost:** depends entirely on who says it, which is why the phrase is so effective.
6	I don't need your permission, but…	**Not a request; a display. Concedes:** nothing legally, everything socially. By naming the asymmetry the speaker converts a right into a courtesy, which is generous — and simultaneously reminds the hearer of the asymmetry, which is not. **Refusal cost:** nil in effect, but refusing would be a declaration of hostility.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise B (Permission / Right / Ability)

#	Item	Answer / guidance
1	Employees can take leave in December.	**Permission** (they are allowed to) · **Right** (they are entitled to) · **Ability/circumstance** (it is possible — the office is open). Forcing: "…but only with sign-off" → permission. "…and it cannot be refused" → right. "…now that the freeze has lifted" → possibility. The ambiguity matters: HR documents exploit it to make rights look like permissions.
2	You can't park there.	**Prohibition** (not allowed) · **Impossibility** (no space; a bollard). Forcing: "…it's reserved" → prohibition. "…the barrier's down" → impossibility. Note that prohibition often masquerades as impossibility precisely to avoid an argument.
3	Members may bring one guest.	**Permission** (chiefly) · **Epistemic possibility** ("it is possible that members will bring a guest") — usually blocked by register, but live in a sentence like "Members may bring one guest; we should cater accordingly." The regulation reading and the prediction reading are formally identical.
4	She couldn't leave the building.	**Permission withheld** (not allowed) · **Ability** (physically unable) · **Circumstance** (the doors were locked). Forcing: "…until security signed her out" → permission. "…her leg was broken" → ability. Note this is the sentence a report writer chooses *precisely because* it does not distinguish them.

Worksheet 1 – Exercise C (Pragmatic Failure)

#	Failure	Repair
1	**"May I remind you" is not a request.** It is a frozen idiom meaning "you have failed and I am noting it". A speaker who intends a genuine question will be heard as issuing a rebuke.	"Could I check — was the deadline Tuesday or Thursday?" Genuine uncertainty must be signalled, or the form supplies its own meaning.
2	**Grant without a request.** "Feel free to" presupposes a desire the hearer does not have. Applied to work nobody wants, it converts an imposition into a generous permission — and makes refusal look ungrateful. Widely recognised as managerial sarcasm.	"I need someone on this over the weekend. Is that something you could do?" — If it is an imposition, ask for it.
3	**Ownership conflict.** "You're welcome to appeal" asserts the speaker's ownership of the appeal process — the very process meant to constrain them. It reveals that the appeal is a favour, which is exactly what an appeal must not be.	"The decision can be appealed to the panel within fourteen days." Agentless, procedural — and the speaker disappears, which is the point.
4	**Register collapse under pressure.** Four hedges mid-cross-examination signals uncertainty to the jury and invites the judge to intervene. Courtroom permission is compressed: the ritual is fixed and deviation reads as weakness.	"May it please the court —" or simply "If I may." Brevity is the register.
5	**False request masking an unlawful question.** The softener implies the panel has the standing to ask and the candidate the standing to refuse; both are false, and the politeness makes refusal *harder*, which compounds the problem.	Do not ask. If the underlying concern is legitimate: "The role requires eligibility to work in the EU — can you confirm you meet that?"

Worksheet 2 – Part A (Manufactured Consent)

#	Manufactured / Honest	Cost to hearer
1	**M:** "You're so much better at these than me — I don't suppose you'd be able to take a look? No pressure at all." **H:** "I've been given the Q3 pack and I can't do it by Friday. Could you take it, or shall I go back and say it won't be ready?"	The manufactured version makes refusal a rejection of a compliment and an admission of unhelpfulness. The honest version costs the speaker something — they must expose their own failure — which is precisely why it is honest.
2	**M:** "I mentioned to Ferreira we could do the migration by March — I assume that's fine? Shout if not." **H:** "I told Ferreira March without checking. That was a mistake. Can we do it, and if not, I'll call him back."	The manufactured version transfers the speaker's error to the team as a fait accompli, and makes objecting a matter of breaking a promise already made to a client. Silence becomes consent to someone else's mistake.
3	**M:** "So we're all agreed on the 14th? Great — anyone with concerns can grab me after." **H:** "I've accepted the 14th. I shouldn't have done that without asking you. Tell me now what breaks, and I'll go back to them."	The public setting plus the pre-closed question means objecting requires interrupting a decision that has been declared. "Grab me after" ensures no objection is ever witnessed.
4	**M:** "I'll just pop the recorder on, if that's OK — easier than notes." **H:** "I'd like to record this. You're free to say no and I'll take notes instead."	The tag arrives after the act is underway; refusing now requires the hearer to stop a process already in motion and explain themselves. Consent obtained this way is worthless — and in some jurisdictions, so is the recording.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (Analytical Reading)

#	Answer
1	**Grants:** were free to withdraw · without giving a reason · without penalty · were welcome to ask questions · might, if they wished, decline · could hardly call it coercive · had been perfectly free. Every structure grants; not one prohibits. This is significant because the passage describes a regime in which nobody exercised any of the freedoms granted. The grammar of freedom and the fact of compliance are not in tension — the passage argues they are causally linked. A form that grants extensively has, by granting, foreclosed the complaint.

#	Answer
2	The form is not lying, and that is the point. "Without penalty" is true within its own frame: no penalty is *imposed*. Forfeiting the payment is a consequence, not a penalty — the money was conditional on completion, so withdrawal simply fails to trigger it. The distinction is legally sound and experientially meaningless. Note "was not required to say": the passage locates the deception in an absence, and absences cannot be quoted against you.
3	*Might* is the weakest permission in the language — weaker than *may*, and carrying a faint air of concession. "If they wished" is doing something worse: it attaches the freedom to the participant's *desire* rather than their entitlement. A right does not depend on wanting it. By framing declination as a matter of preference, the sentence makes any actual declination look like a whim — which is exactly how the woman in the second cohort was treated.
4	Free indirect style, carrying the institution's own voice. "Not, of course, that she had been promised she would be" is the form of a legal defence — it anticipates the objection and disposes of it. But the "of course" is Reyes's, or the narrator's, and it is savage: it performs the institution's reasoning so faithfully that the reasoning indicts itself. The reader hears the compliance officer and the narrator in the same clause.
5	Both are true because "free" describes the permission structure and "as they were asked" describes the behaviour, and the passage's argument is that the first produces the second. Freedom that is granted, documented, and never exercised functions as evidence that no coercion occurred — which makes it more useful to the institution than an instruction would be. The sentence is an argument that consent, properly engineered, is a more efficient instrument of control than command, because it recruits the participant's own agency and then holds them responsible for it.
6	Through consequence rather than rule. Nothing forbids withdrawal; withdrawal costs the payment. Nothing forbids declining a task; the woman who declined was not invited back. Nothing forbids questions; no one asked. Prohibition is achieved by making the permitted act expensive and then leaving the participant free to choose. Note the passage's method: it never states the mechanism, it lists three facts ("nobody withdrew, nobody asked, she was not invited back") and lets the reader perform the inference — the same technique the form uses on the participants.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Transformation)

#	Answer
1	I'm **going to have to ask you** (to).
2	You are **free to leave** whenever you wish.
3	I **trust you have no objection** / **I trust you won't mind**.
4	**If I may**, (I'd like to interrupt).
5	She was **welcome to stay** / **welcome to attend**.
6	There's **no pressure** (at all).
7	It's **not mine to give**.
8	I **hope you don't mind**, (but I've already…).

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Drafting) — Model Answers

#	Model
1	"Thanks for putting the case — I can see why you'd want it. It isn't something I'm able to authorise, and it isn't going to change on appeal, so I'd rather tell you that now than have you spend time on it. Happy to talk about the Q3 options whenever suits." — *No harsh word appears. "Isn't something I'm able to" removes the speaker's agency; "isn't going to change" closes the appeal pre-emptively; the redirection to Q3 grants the hearer a face-saving next move.*
2	"I'm taking my two carry-over days on the 3rd and 4th — that's them used before the deadline. Let me know if that clashes with anything and I'll work around it." — *The entitlement is asserted, not requested ("I'm taking"). The concession offered ("if that clashes") is about logistics, not permission, so the superior may adjust the timing but cannot refuse the leave.*
3	"You're very welcome to raise this at the board — provided the Chair agrees it's substantive enough for the agenda, and provided we've exhausted the internal route first." **Annotation:** the grant is real ("you're very welcome to"), and warm. Both conditions are gates operated by the grantor or their allies. "Substantive enough" supplies no test; "exhausted" supplies no endpoint. The permission is genuine and unreachable, and every word of it would survive a grievance hearing.

#	Model
4	"On the March cover — it turns out Legal need the review closed before quarter-end, which lands it on the 14th. I know that's the week we'd said you'd be away, and I'm sorry; I don't have the flexibility on this one that I thought I had. Can we look at the following week?" — *"It turns out" and "Legal need" supply an agentless cause. "I don't have the flexibility I thought I had" concedes an error of estimation rather than a change of mind. The apology is real; the reversal is not admitted.*

Marking Rubric — Extended Writing (Worksheet 3 Part C)

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Range	Six or more distinct structures used accurately	0–4
Precision	What each form concedes is correctly identified and deployed	0–4
Analysis	Treats grammar as evidence, not illustration	0–3
Register	Formal-academic, consistent	0–2
Coherence	Argument develops; candidate's own modality controlled	0–2

Teacher Notes — Common C1 Pitfalls

- **The C1 insight is that asking concedes.** Every request form admits something about who holds authority. Candidates who can name what a form concedes — and who therefore understand why "If I may" does not wait for an answer — have grasped the topic. Those who merely rank forms by politeness have not.
- **Can does three jobs** — permission, right, ability — and institutions exploit the overlap systematically. "Employees can take leave in December" is a sentence HR chooses precisely because it does not say whether the leave is a right or a favour. Exercise B is the diagnostic.
- **Grants are assertions of ownership.** "You're welcome to" and "feel free to" are not generous — they presuppose that the thing was the speaker's to give. This is why "You're welcome to appeal" from the decision-maker is so corrosive: it reveals the appeal as a favour.
- **Manufactured consent is the practical payoff.** Worksheet 2 is the most useful material in the set for candidates entering professional life. The devices are not exotic — the 4.55pm email and the "if that's all right?" tag are daily occurrences — and learners who can name them can decline them.
- **Do not moralise the material.** These devices are not villainy; competent, decent people use them constantly, often without noticing. The aim is recognition, not condemnation. Candidates who conclude that all indirectness is manipulation have overcorrected and will be unbearable.
- **Towards C2:** the next questions are whether consent obtained through these forms is consent at all, whether English has any structure that grants permission without asserting ownership, and what it means that the language of freedom is the most efficient instrument of compliance we have.