

Must vs have to: rules and obligations

CEFR A2-B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Must is the obligation you feel or state. Have to is the obligation the world gives you. The two negatives mean completely different things.

The rule

Must: the speaker's obligation

- Must expresses an obligation the speaker believes in: "I must finish this today."
- Must suits written rules, notices and instructions: "Passengers must show a ticket."
- Must has no past or future form. Use had to for the past and will have to for the future.
- In questions, must is rare. Use have to: "Do I have to sign here?"

Have to: the obligation from outside

- Have to expresses rules, laws and circumstances: "She has to take medicine every day."
- Have to works in every tense: had to, has had to, will have to, would have to.
- The subject changes the form: I have to, she has to, they have to.
- In negatives, not goes with the auxiliary: do not have to, does not have to, did not have to.

The two negatives

- Must not and mustn't mean it is forbidden: "You must not park here."
- Do not have to means it is not necessary: "You do not have to pay; entry is free."
- The difference is absolute, so choose the negative with care.
- Answering a question, use do not have to for freedom: "Do I have to leave?" — "No, you do not have to."

Must for deduction

- Must can show that something is logically certain: "You must be tired after that journey."
- The opposite deduction uses cannot: "She cannot be at home; her car is gone."
- Must for deduction has no have to equivalent. "You have to be tired" describes an obligation, not a conclusion.
- For past deduction, use must have plus the past participle: "He must have missed the train."

Which one sounds natural?

- In everyday speech, have to is more common for rules and routines: "I have to get up early."
- Must sounds formal and strong, and it appears on signs: "Staff must wash their hands."
- When you give advice, should is often better than must, because must can sound like an order.
- When the obligation is your own decision, either works, and must sounds more personal.

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. Passengers ___ show their tickets at the gate.

2. I ___ wear a uniform at work; the company requires it.

3. You ___ smoke in the hospital. It is forbidden.

4. You ___ bring a towel; the hotel provides one.

5. She ___ work last Saturday.

6. We ___ leave early tomorrow if the weather is bad.

7. You ___ be tired after such a long flight.

8. ___ I have to sign the form today?

9. Children ___ wear helmets on the building site.

10. He ___ have forgotten our appointment; he is never late.

11. I ___ call my mother tonight; I promised her.

12. The notice says guests ___ not use the pool after ten.

13. You ___ pay for the museum; admission is free.

14. She ___ to take her medicine every morning.

15. We ___ hurry; the film starts in ten minutes.

16. They ___ work on Sunday last week.

17. Do we ___ book a table for six people?

18. That story cannot be true. She ___ be lying.

19. You ___ bring your own lunch; the cafe is open.

20. All staff ___ complete the training by Friday.

Answer key

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1. **must** — A written rule from an authority takes must, followed by the base verb show.
2. **have to** — The obligation comes from an external rule, so have to is correct.
3. **must not** — A prohibition takes must not, which bans the action completely.
4. **do not have to** — The towel is unnecessary but allowed, so do not have to expresses no obligation.
5. **had to** — Must has no past form, so the past obligation uses had to.
6. **will have to** — The future obligation takes will have to, because must cannot carry will.
7. **must** — Must expresses a logical deduction about the present, not an obligation.
8. **Do** — Questions about obligation use do with have to: Do I have to sign?
9. **have to** — A general external rule takes have to, and children is plural so have is correct.
10. **must** — Past deduction uses must have plus the past participle forgotten.
11. **have to** — A personal promise creates an obligation that can take have to in everyday speech.
12. **must** — A formal prohibition on the notice takes must not.
13. **do not have to** — Free admission means payment is not necessary, so do not have to is correct.
14. **has** — The external obligation takes has to with the third-person subject she.
15. **must** — The speaker feels the urgency, so must plus the base verb hurry is correct.
16. **had to** — Last week is a past time, so the past obligation takes had to.
17. **have to** — With the auxiliary do, the obligation uses have to: do we have to book.
18. **must** — Must be plus -ing expresses a strong deduction about what is happening now.
19. **do not have to** — The cafe makes a packed lunch unnecessary, so do not have to fits.
20. **have to** — All staff is plural, so the external obligation uses have to.