

Mustn't vs don't have to: ban or choice

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

Mustn't means you cannot do it. Don't have to means you can, but nobody requires it. The two negatives sit almost opposite each other.

The rule

Two negatives, two meanings

- Must not and mustn't ban an action: "You mustn't smoke here."
- Do not have to and don't have to remove the necessity: "You don't have to come."
- A ban says no. No necessity says the action is allowed but optional.
- The difference can turn a rule into an invitation, so read carefully.

Mustn't: prohibition

- Use mustn't for rules, signs and strong warnings: "Visitors mustn't touch the paintings."
- Mustn't exists only in the present.
- For the past, use was not allowed to or could not: "We couldn't park there."
- Think of mustn't as one word meaning not allowed.

Don't have to: no obligation

- Use don't have to when something is optional: "You don't have to pay; entry is free."
- The form changes with the subject: don't have to, doesn't have to, didn't have to.
- The past is didn't have to: "I didn't have to work yesterday."
- Will have to covers the future: "You will have to book a table."

Questions and answers

- Questions use do: "Do I have to sign here?"
- A short answer uses don't: "No, you don't."
- Must not is almost never used in questions.
- For permission questions, use can: "Can I leave now?"

Common confusions

- Mustn't is not the negative of have to; don't have to is.
- Needn't means the same as don't have to: "You needn't wait."
- Must for deduction is different again: "He must be tired."
- Read the sentence twice before choosing, because the two negatives sit far apart in meaning.

Questions

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

1. You ___ use your phone in the exam. It is against the rules.

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

3. Visitors ___ feed the animals. It is forbidden.

4. I ___ work tomorrow; it is a holiday.

5. She ___ wear a uniform at her new job.

6. We ___ pay for parking because the first hour was free.

7. You will ___ book a table for six.

8. ___ I have to sign the form?

9. You ___ hurry; we have plenty of time.

10. Passengers ___ lean out of the window.

11. He ___ get up early on Sundays.

12. You ___ pay me back; it was a gift.

13. The sign says guests ___ use the pool after ten.

14. We ___ leave yet; the train is at nine.

15. She ___ cook tonight; her friends are bringing dinner.

16. Choose the correct sentence.

17. In the past, children ___ wear a uniform at that school.

18. You ___ take a taxi; I can drive you.

19. "You needn't wait" means ___.

20. Students ___ use dictionaries during the test. It is not allowed.

Answer key

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1. **mustn't** — A rule that forbids an action takes mustn't.
2. **don't have to** — The towel is unnecessary but allowed, so don't have to fits.
3. **mustn't** — A prohibition takes mustn't, which bans feeding completely.
4. **don't have to** — The holiday removes the obligation, so don't have to is correct.
5. **doesn't have to** — The third-person negative of no obligation is doesn't have to.
6. **didn't have to** — The past form of no necessity is didn't have to.
7. **have to** — The future obligation uses will have to.
8. **Do** — Questions about obligation use the auxiliary do with have to.
9. **needn't** — Needn't means the hurry is unnecessary, the same as don't have to.
10. **mustn't** — A safety rule that forbids the action takes mustn't.
11. **doesn't have to** — Sunday removes the obligation for he, so doesn't have to is correct.
12. **don't have to** — The repayment is unnecessary but not forbidden, so don't have to fits.
13. **mustn't** — A sign stating a rule uses mustn't for the prohibition.
14. **don't have to** — There is no need to leave yet, so don't have to is correct.
15. **doesn't have to** — Bringing dinner removes the need to cook, so doesn't have to fits.
16. **You mustn't smoke in the hospital.** — A ban takes mustn't plus the base verb smoke with no to.
17. **didn't have to** — The past of no obligation is didn't have to.
18. **don't have to** — The lift removes the need for a taxi, so don't have to is correct.
19. **you don't have to wait** — Needn't and don't have to both express no obligation.
20. **mustn't** — Not being allowed is a prohibition, so mustn't is correct.