

Should vs ought to: advice and expectation

CEFR B1 • 20 questions • A4 / US Letter

Should and ought to mean almost the same thing. Both give advice and state expectations; should is more common and takes questions and negatives without help.

The rule

Nearly the same meaning

- Should and ought to both give advice: "You should rest." / "You ought to rest."
- Both can state an expectation: "The parcel should arrive today."
- Ought to sounds a little more formal and a little stronger.
- In everyday speech, should is far more common.

Form and the to rule

- Should takes the base verb with no to: "You should go."
- Ought always takes to: "You ought to go."
- Neither verb changes with the subject: he should, she ought to.
- Never mix the patterns: "You should to go" and "You ought go" are both wrong.

Questions and negatives

- Questions use should: "Should I call her?"
- Negatives use should not or shouldn't: "You shouldn't worry."
- Ought to in questions is very formal: "Ought I to call?"
- Use should for the negative: "You shouldn't eat so late."

Advice, expectation and criticism

- Advice about the present or future: "You should drink more water."
- Expectation based on a plan: "They should be here by six."
- Criticism of a past action uses should have: "You should have told me."
- Ought to have works the same way but is rarer: "You ought to have told me."

Should, must and had better

- Must is stronger than should: "You must wear a seatbelt."
- Should is a recommendation: "You should wear a coat."
- Had better warns of a bad result: "You had better hurry, or we will miss it."
- Choose must for rules, should for advice and had better for a warning.

Questions

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

1. You ___ rest after the journey.

2. You ___ to rest after the journey.

3. You ___ go to bed early; you look tired.

4. The train ___ arrive at six, according to the timetable.

5. ___ I open the window?

6. You ___ eat so late; it is bad for your sleep.

7. You ___ have booked earlier; the hotel is full.

8. You ___ to have booked earlier.

9. We ___ better leave now, or we will miss the train.

10. Passengers ___ wear a seatbelt. It is the law.

11. You ___ drink more water in hot weather.

12. The parcel ___ arrive tomorrow.

13. ___ we invite them to dinner?

14. You ___ worry so much about the exam.

15. She ___ to apologise for being late.

16. We ___ have taken a map; we got lost.

17. This medicine ___ be taken twice a day.

18. "You ought to rest" means almost the same as ___.

19. You ___ have told me you were coming!

20. He ___ to be more careful with his keys.

Answer key

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1. **should** — Should gives advice and takes the base verb with no to.
2. **ought** — Ought to always keeps to before the base verb.
3. **should** — Advice for the present uses should plus the base verb.
4. **should** — Should expresses an expectation based on a plan or a timetable.
5. **Should** — Questions take should, while ought to is rare in questions.
6. **shouldn't** — The negative of should is shouldn't plus the base verb.
7. **should** — Should have plus the past participle criticises a past action.
8. **ought** — Ought to have criticises the past in a formal register.
9. **had** — Had better warns of a bad result if the advice is ignored.
10. **must** — A legal rule is stronger than advice, so must is correct.
11. **should** — Should gives health advice with the base verb drink.
12. **should** — Should expresses an expectation about the future.
13. **Should** — Questions use should before the subject, with no to.
14. **shouldn't** — Shouldn't is the negative form with the base verb worry.
15. **ought** — Ought keeps to, so ought to apologise is the correct pattern.
16. **should** — Should have criticises the past decision not to take a map.
17. **should** — Should plus the passive be taken gives a recommendation.
18. **you should rest** — Ought to and should both give advice, so their meanings are nearly the same.
19. **should** — Should have plus the participle criticises a past action.
20. **ought** — Ought takes to, so ought to be is the correct advice form.