

## Should, ought to and had better

Reminder → C29–C32

A

We can often use either **should** or **ought to** to talk about obligations and recommendations (e.g. You **should** / **ought to** finish your homework before you go out) and probability (e.g. It **should** / **ought to** be ready by now) although in general **should** is used more frequently. **Ought to** is used particularly in speech and most often to talk about obligation rather than probability.

When we conclude, on the basis of some evidence we have, that something is certain or very likely we can use **must** (see Unit 18) but not **should** / **ought to**:

- It's the third time she's been skating this week. She **must** really enjoy it.

Note also the following details –

☆ we prefer **should** when we say what an outside authority recommends:

- The manual says that the computer **should** be disconnected from the power supply before the cover is removed. (*rather than ... ought to be disconnected ...*)

☆ we use **should** (or **would**), not **ought to**, when we give advice with I ...:

- I **should** leave early tomorrow, if I were you. (*or I would leave ...; or I'd leave ...*)

☆ we prefer **should** in questions, particularly **wh-questions**:

- What **should** I do if I have any problems?       **Should** I ring you at home?

B

We use **should** / **ought to** + **have** + **past participle** to talk about something that didn't happen in the past and we are sorry that it didn't:

- We **should** / **ought to have waited** for the rain to stop. (I'm sorry we didn't)

We often use this pattern to indicate some regret or criticism and the negative forms **shouldn't** / **oughtn't to have** are almost always used in this way.

We also use **should** / **ought to** + **have** + **past participle** to talk about an expectation that something happened, has happened, or will happen:

- If the flight was on time, he **should** / **ought to have arrived** in Jakarta early this morning.

C

We can use **should** in questions that are offers or that request confirmation or advice:

- Should** I phone for a taxi for you?  
 Who **should** I pass the message to?

Note that in sentences like these we can also use **shall** with a very similar meaning.

Compare the use of **shall** and **should** in sentences such as the following, where 'I shall' means 'I intend to' and 'I should' means 'I ought to':

- I **shall** read the script on the train tomorrow. (*or I'll read ...*) *and*  
 I **should** read the script on the train tomorrow but I know that I'll be too tired.

D

We can use **had better** instead of **should** / **ought to**, especially in spoken English, to say that we think it is a good idea to do something:

- If you're not well, you'd **better** ask Clare to go instead. (*or ... you should / ought to ...*)

although we don't use it to talk about the past or to make general comments:

- You **should** / **ought to** have caught a later train. (*not* You had better have caught ...)  
 I don't think parents **should** / **ought to** give children sweets. (*not* ... parents had better give ...)

We prefer **had better** if we want to express particular urgency or in demands and threats:

- There's someone moving about downstairs. We'd **better** call the police, quickly.

Note that the negative form is **had better not**, and in questions the subject comes after **had**:

- He'd **better not** be late again or he'll be in trouble.  
 **Had** we **better** get a taxi? (*or Should* we get ...?)



## Exercises

- 20.1** Complete these sentences with **should / ought to + infinitive (active)**, **should / ought to be + past participle (passive)**, or **should / ought to have + past participle** using each of the verbs from the box once only. **A & B**

answer arrive be go put remove resign send wear win

- Thomas is running so well at the moment that he ..... the 800 metres easily.
- Where ..... the cheese? In the fridge?
- The tickets ..... a couple of weeks before we go on holiday.
- Payment for the full amount ..... with this application form.
- All packaging ..... before switching on the printer for the first time.
- It's important to look smart at the interview. You ..... a suit.
- There are many people who think the President ..... years ago.
- ..... we ..... the questions in English or in French?
- If you want my advice, I ..... by train rather than car.
- I can't imagine what's happened to Nadia. She ..... here by now.

- 20.2** In which sentences can you use **should** or **must** and in which can you only use **must**? Where both are possible, consider the difference between **should** and **must**. **A**

- A timetable ..... be set for withdrawing the army.
- Lev isn't home yet. He ..... have been held up at work.
- A: I wonder how old Louis is?  
B: Well, he went to school with my mother, so he ..... be well over 50.
- If you smell gas, you ..... phone the emergency number.
- You ..... try to visit Nepal – it's a beautiful country.
- A: I know I'm always complaining that my house is small, but it's very convenient for work.  
B: Yes, it ..... be handy living so close to your office.

- 20.3** If necessary correct these conversations using **should / ought to, must, shall, or had better**, or write ✓. **A, C & D**

- A: There's something wrong with David's computer yet again.  
B: He should wish he'd never bought it.
- A: The next meeting's on 3rd April.  
B: I'd better make a note of that, or I'll forget.
- A: Have you put on weight recently?  
B: Yes. I shall do more exercise, but I never seem to have time.
- A: The children from next door have been throwing stones at our windows.  
B: Well, they shouldn't do it again, otherwise I'll call the police.
- A: I'm freezing.  
B: You'd better have worn a thicker coat.
- A: Businesses had better not be allowed to give money to political parties.  
B: I totally agree.
- A: When have we got to be in Bristol?  
B: By four. I think we'd better get started.
- A: Do you want to go out for lunch?  
B: Well, I should be revising for my maths exam ... but okay.
- A: I've looked all over the house and can't find the keys.  
B: Well, if they're not here, they must still be in the car.
- A: It's so expensive to park here.  
B: Yes, I don't think people had better pay to park at work at all.

