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One more common way to express [obligation](#), necessity or a lack of obligation is with the semi-modal ‘**need**’. A semi-modal is a word that acts like both a [modal verb](#) and a [main verb](#).

Present and Future

‘Need’ as a modal

As a modal verb, ‘need’ is most typically used in negative sentences or in affirmative sentences with a negative meaning. It expresses *absence of necessity* or obligation, and it is followed by a [bare infinitive](#):

- Nobody **need think** that we are rich.
- She **need not arrive** (**needn’t arrive**) so early.
- If you want good results, you **will need to work** harder.

‘Need’ as a modal verb also occurs in interrogative sentences, but this use is much more formal:

- **Need** you make so much noise?

If used in statements, ‘need to’ is often used in the same context as ‘have to’ meaning *necessity*, but many times, ‘need to’ is used to express something that is less urgent, something in which you have a choice:

- I **have to work** late tonight.
- I **need to work** late tonight.

‘Need’ as a main verb

We can use main verb ‘need’ as an alternative to semi-modal ‘need’. Main verb ‘need’ is

followed by **to** and it changes with person, number and tense:

- *I, you, we, they* - **need to**
- *She, he, it* - **needs to**
- *I, you, she, he, it, we, they* - **needed to**

'Need' as a main verb expresses that something is *necessary*. We can use it in affirmative, negative and interrogative sentences.

- *Do you have a minute? I **need to talk** to you about something.*
- *I **don't need to be** told that I should lose weight.*
- *Do you **need to use** the hairdryer?*

Compare:

Semi-modal *need*

Main verb *need*

Need it be so dark in here? (formal)

Does it **need to** be so dark in here?

You **needn't** mention this to your father. You **don't need to** mention this to your father.

In these examples, the meaning is the same for semi-modal *need* and main verb *need* + *to*.

To summarize:

NEEDN'T and DON'T NEED TO

- Instead of **needn't**, you can use **don't/doesn't need to**. So you can say:
 - We **needn't** hurry. *or*
 - We **don't need to** hurry.
- **Needn't** and **don't need to** are similar to don't have to: We **don't have to** hurry.

via <https://pt.slideshare.net/Channy2/modal-verbs-13425558/6>

Talking about Necessity in the past

The past tense of the main verb 'need to' is '**needed to**':

- *I **needed to** have my hair cut.*
- *Why did they **need to** change the lock?*

In the simple past negative form, we use '**didn't**' with 'need' to denote *no obligation in the past*.

- *I **didn't need to arrive** so early.*

'Need' as a modal does not have a past tense form. 'Needn't + perfect bare infinitive' (have + [past participle](#)), however, denote actions which were *performed but were unnecessary*:

- *We **needn't have bought** any milk. We still have plenty at home. (we bought some milk, but it wasn't necessary)*

- She **needn't have given** me such an expensive present.

Talking about Necessity in the future

The future tense of the main verb 'need to' is '**will need to**':

will need to + infinitive

- I **will need to drink** a few cups of coffee in order to stay awake.

Passive Voice

'Need' can also be used with the passive voice. We use it to refer to tasks that the speaker is probably not going to do personally or when it is not important to know who is going to complete the action.

- My car **needs to be washed**.
- The dog **needs to be fed**.
- The building **needs to be inspected** by the city.
- My hair **doesn't need to be cut** yet.

Note: The negative form uses '**do/does/did**'.

We can use a [gerund](#) with 'need'. This structure is used in the same way as above. In this case, the gerund carries a passive meaning. Usually, the situations involve *fixing or improving things*:

- My house **needs painting**.
- My house **needs to be painted**.
- The house **doesn't need painting** right now.
- This floor **needs fixing**.
- This floor **needs to be fixed**.

Note that the structures with to-infinitive and gerund are completely interchangeable.

This video from OnScreen Academy explains the usage of the verb 'need' in different tenses and meanings:

See also:

[Modal Verbs: Overview](#)

[Modal Verbs for Obligation: Statements](#)

[Modal Verbs for Obligation: Negative and Questions](#)