SHALL, SHOULD, MAY — AND WHAT THEY COST YOU

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHALL AND SHOULD?

Near the front of the book, on the "Notes on the plan of the 18th Edition" page, there's a small table that decides a surprising number of exam answers. The book is written like a legal document and the verbs are doing real work.

WORD	MEANING	IN PRACTICE
`shall`	**Requirement**	You must do it. No discretion.
`should`	**Recommendation**	Good practice. Not compulsory. (Sometimes the book spells out "recommendation" instead.)
`may`	**Permission**	You're allowed to. You don't have to.
`can`	**Possibility / capability**	It is possible — a statement of fact, not an instruction.



A surprising number of exam answers turn on which verb the regulation used. **Shall** is the only one that leaves you no choice; **should** is good practice you can depart from with a recorded reason; **may** and **can** oblige nothing at all. When a question hinges on whether something is required, go back and read the verb.

✋ This matters more than it looks. **Shall** is required; **should** is recommended. Read a "should" as a "shall" and you'll answer a whole family of questions wrong.

BS 7671 · Notes on the plan of the 18th Edition · shall / should / may / can

Free section from Sparky Study Notes. The full Level 3 notes, 1,463 practice questions and the video lessons: sparkystudynotes.co.uk