

To need and need

Introduction



I **need** to speak to your manager urgently - can you put me through?

Definition

Need is a modal auxiliary verb.

To need has a similar function and meaning and is more commonly used.

Construction

| | To need | Need |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Affirmative | subject + 'need' + infinitive I need to go. He needs to go. | No affirmative form. See note below. I need go. ❌ |
| Negative | subject + 'do' + 'not' + 'need' + infinitive I don't need to go. He doesn't need to go. | subject + 'need' + 'not' + bare infinitive I needn't go. |
| Interrogative | 'do' + subject + 'need' + infinitive Do I need to go? Does he need to go? | 'need' + subject + bare infinitive Need I go? |

Note that

1. Like other modal auxiliaries, **need** has no infinitive and we use the same form with 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it', 'we' and 'they'. 'Do' is not used to form negative or interrogative sentences.
2. **To need** takes the usual forms depending on the subject and the tense.
3. **To need** can also be followed by a noun or gerund.

You **need** a visa to visit Japan.
My apartment **needs** cleaning.

This is not possible with the modal auxiliary **need**.

You **don't need** a visa to visit Japan. 
You **needn't** a visa to visit Japan. 

Uses

To need and **need** are both used to talk about something that is necessary.

Affirmative forms

Need cannot be used in the affirmative form instead of **to need** but we might read or hear it very rarely in this kind of sentence:

He **need** have no fear of losing her - she loves him very much.

Similarly, we can use it with negative or restrictive words such as 'hardly', 'never', 'nobody' or 'only'.

We **need** only provide lunch for the visitors - they'll have dinner at the hotel.
I **need** hardly say how important it is that we respect the deadline.
If we solve this before the end of the day, he **need** never know about it.

Negative forms

Need can be used in the negative form instead of **to need**.

You **don't need** to come to the meeting if you don't want to.

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You **needn't** come to the meeting if you don't want to.

Most of the time, either form can be used but **don't need** is usually preferred for a general rather than a specific necessity:

You **needn't/don't need** to email him today - it can wait until tomorrow.

You **don't need** to be fluent in English to write an email.

Needn't/don't need are mainly used in the same way as 'don't have to'. 'Don't have to' is sometimes preferred when the lack of necessity is a general truth or decided by someone other than the speaker:

You **needn't/don't need** to/don't **have to** bring any wine tonight - we have plenty.

You don't **have to** take wine to Lionel's parties - he always has plenty.

Interrogative forms

To need is preferred in modern, spoken English:

Do you **need** to leave now?

Need is considered very formal:

Need you leave now?

Other tenses

The present continuous

Future tenses

To need and **needn't** can also be followed by the **present continuous**:

We **need** to be working on the first phase of the project this week.

We **needn't** be working on the second phase this week.

We can use the present simple form of **to need** or other future tenses. For example:

We **need** to talk about this tomorrow. [the need is felt now]

If you visit England, you'll **need** to take an umbrella.

We're **going to need** to employ more staff.

These are very similar and often interchangeable but **to need** sometimes suggests there is a choice or a potential personal benefit:

I **need** to send three more emails before I go home tonight.

I **need** to buy some bread on the way home - is there a baker's near here?

whereas **have to** can suggest a lack of choice or something decided or imposed by another person. There is also a suggestion of urgency a negative consequence if something is not done:

I **have to** finish this today because I'm going on holiday tomorrow.

The boss told me I **have to** go to Paris next week - he wants me to speak to the client personally.

In the past simple, 'had to' is used more than **needed to**.

It rained so we **had to** cancel the barbecue. ✓

It rained so we **needed to** cancel the barbecue. ✗

Need as a noun

'Need' is also a noun with a related meaning. It can be used in different ways. For example:

There's no need for another office in Paris - we already have two.

There's no need to finish that today - I'll do it tomorrow.

We have need of some new computers.

I'm in need of chocolate.

The company respects the needs of its overseas staff.

Examples



I **need to finish this by Friday.**



Nobody **need find out if we keep this to ourselves.**



She **doesn't need to work today.**



You **needn't worry - I can fix it.**



Shall we go for a coffee or **do you **need** to get back to the office?**



Need we make a decision now or can we wait till next week?



It **needn't** be expensive to visit London - buses are cheap and most museums are free.



My office **needs** tidying before my visitors arrive.



You **need** to be getting much better results than this.



We'll **need** to look at these figures more closely later to develop a strategy.

Some common expressions

| Expression | Meaning | Example |
|--------------------|---------------------|---|
| If need be. | If it is necessary. | Don't worry, we can spend an extra day on this if need be. |

subject + **needn't** +
'bother' (+ **gerund**)

Don't need to - it often
expresses annoyance.

"I'll do that later."
"You **needn't** bother. I'll
do it myself."

Note that this is
considered very familiar
and should be avoided in
the 2nd person.

He **needn't** bother
apologising - I've had
enough of him.



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