Deduction & Speculation (must be/can't be/could be): The Certainty Scale: Must, May, Might, Could & Can't Exercises

Fill in the blank with the correct option.

1. I'm not sure where Tom is. He ___ be at the library — he sometimes studies there after school.
   a) must
   b) can't
   c) might
   d) mustn't

2. The car engine is making a terrible noise. There ___ something wrong with it.
   a) can't be
   b) must be
   c) might not be
   d) shouldn't be

3. Anna was at the gym yesterday looking perfectly healthy, so she ___ be seriously ill.
   a) can't
   b) must
   c) should
   d) might

4. I don't know where my keys are. They ___ be in my coat pocket — I'll go and check.
   a) must
   b) can't
   c) mustn't
   d) could

5. Lisa has been working 12-hour shifts all week. She ___ be completely exhausted.
   a) must
   b) might
   c) could
   d) can't

6. We're not sure, but the new neighbours ___ be from Spain — they sometimes speak Spanish to each other.
   a) can't
   b) might
   c) must
   d) mustn't

7. Laura has just adopted a cat, so she ___ allergic to cats.
   a) should be
   b) must be
   c) can't be
   d) will be

8. The weather forecast says there's a 40% chance of rain. We ___ need an umbrella later.
   a) must
   b) can't
   c) mustn't
   d) may

9. Tim has six luxury cars and a private jet. He ___ extremely rich.
   a) must be
   b) might be
   c) could be
   d) may be

10. Someone left their bag on the bus. It ___ belong to that woman who just got off — but I'm not sure.
    a) must
    b) could
    c) can't
    d) mustn't

11. I've called John five times and his phone is switched off. He ___ have his phone with him.
 a) must   b) might
 c) should   d) can't

12. I'm not certain, but this word ___ mean the same thing in both languages — the spelling is very similar.
 a) can't   b) mustn't
 c) might   d) must

13. Kevin hasn't eaten anything all day. He ___ be very hungry by now.
 a) might   b) must
 c) can't   d) could

14. I think I left the window open this morning. The house ___ be cold when we get back.
 a) may   b) must
 c) can't   d) mustn't

15. She says she's never seen that film, but she described every scene in detail. That ___ be true.
 a) must   b) might
 c) could   d) can't

16. I haven't seen Rachel today. She ___ be working from home — she does that sometimes.
 a) must   b) can't
 c) could   d) mustn't

17. Oliver always arrives at work at exactly 8:00 a.m., every single day. He ___ live very close to the office.
 a) must   b) could
 c) might   d) can't

18. There's a strange noise in the attic. It ___ be the wind, or perhaps a bird got in.
 a) can't   b) might
 c) must   d) mustn't

19. He says he won the lottery, but he still takes the bus to work every day. His story ___ be right.
 a) must   b) might
 c) can't   d) could

20. There's a small chance that tomorrow's meeting ___ be cancelled, but nothing has been confirmed.
 a) must   b) can't
 c) mustn't   d) may

Answers

1. c) might
2. b) must be
3. a) can't
4. d) could
5. a) must
6. b) might
7. c) can't be
8. d) may
9. a) must be
10. b) could
11. d) can't
12. c) might
13. b) must
14. a) may
15. d) can't
16. c) could
17. a) must
18. b) might
19. c) can't
20. d) may

Explanations

1. "might" (c)

Use 'might' when you are NOT sure — it expresses possibility, not certainty. The clue 'I'm not sure' and 'sometimes' tell us this is a guess, not a strong deduction. 'Must' would be too strong here.

2. "must be" (b)

Use 'must be' when the evidence is strong and clear. A terrible noise from the engine is strong evidence that something is wrong. This is a strong deduction, not just a possibility.

3. "can't" (a)

Use 'can't' when the evidence makes something almost impossible. She was healthy at the gym yesterday, so it's almost impossible that she is seriously ill now.

4. "could" (d)

Use 'could' to express possibility — something that is possible but you are not certain about. 'I don't know' and 'I'll go and check' show this is an uncertain guess. 'Must' would be too strong here.

5. "must" (a)

Use 'must' when the evidence is very strong. Working 12-hour shifts all week is strong evidence of exhaustion — we can be almost certain about this conclusion.

6. "might" (b)

Use 'might' for uncertain guesses. 'We're not sure' and 'sometimes' indicate uncertainty. They could also speak Spanish without being from Spain, so this is just a possibility, not a strong deduction.

7. "can't be" (c)

Use 'can't be' when evidence makes something logically impossible. If she adopted a cat, she logically cannot be allergic to cats — nobody would adopt an animal they're allergic to.

8. "may" (d)

Use 'may' when something is possible but not certain. A 40% chance means it's possible but not definite. 'Must' (almost certain) and 'can't' (almost impossible) are both too strong for a 40% probability.

9. "must be" (a)

Use 'must be' when the evidence is overwhelming. Six luxury cars and a private jet are very strong evidence of extreme wealth — this is not just a guess but a near-certain conclusion.

10. "could" (b)

Use 'could' for a possibility that you are not sure about. The speaker says 'I'm not sure', which tells us this is a guess, not a strong deduction. 'Must' would express too much certainty.

11. "can't" (d)

Use 'can't' when repeated evidence makes something almost impossible. Five unanswered calls plus a switched-off phone is very strong evidence that he doesn't have his phone. This is a strong negative deduction.

12. "might" (c)

Use 'might' when you are not certain. 'I'm not certain' directly tells us this is an uncertain guess. Similar spelling is some evidence, but not enough for 'must' (strong deduction).

13. "must" (b)

Use 'must' when the evidence leads to an almost certain conclusion. Not eating all day is very strong evidence of hunger — we can be nearly sure about this.

14. "may" (a)

Use 'may' for something that is possible. 'I think' (not certain about the window) means we can't be sure the house will be cold. This is a possibility, not a strong deduction.

15. "can't" (d)

Use 'can't' when evidence strongly contradicts a claim. Describing every scene in detail is impossible if you've never seen the film. The evidence (detailed scene descriptions) almost certainly disproves her claim.

16. "could" (c)

Use 'could' for a possible explanation that you are not certain about. 'She does that sometimes' shows it's a possibility, not a certainty. If she ALWAYS worked from home on this day, 'must' would be more appropriate.

17. "must" (a)

Use 'must' when the evidence is consistent and strong. 'Always' and 'every single day' suggest a very reliable pattern. Arriving at exactly the same time every day is strong evidence that he lives nearby.

18. "might" (b)

Use 'might' when there are multiple possible explanations and you are not sure which one is correct. 'Or perhaps' shows the speaker is considering different possibilities, not making a strong deduction.

19. "can't" (c)

Use 'can't' when the evidence strongly contradicts a claim. A lottery winner would not typically take the bus every day — the evidence almost certainly disproves his story.

20. "may" (d)

Use 'may' for something that is possible but not certain or confirmed. 'A small chance' and 'nothing has been confirmed' tell us this is a possibility, not a strong deduction. 'Must' and 'can't' would both express too much certainty.