

Had better: form and meaning

Note: We use had better (Had better + bare infinitive)

- Had here is an unreal past; the meaning is present or future:
- I had/I'd better ring him at once/tomorrow. (*This would be a good thing to do*)
- To refer to the present or the future,
- To talk about actions we think people should do or which are desirable in a specific situation.

Example: *I had/I'd better ring him at once/tomorrow. (This would be a good thing to do)*

The verb form is always *had*, not *have*. We normally shorten it to 'd better in informal situations. It is followed by the infinitive without *to*. Examples are shown below

- *Right: It's five o'clock. I'd better go now before the traffic gets too bad.*
- *Wrong: I'd better to go now.*

Note: Had better is a strong expression.

We use it if we think there will be negative results if someone does not do what is desired or suggested. Examples:

- *She'd better get here soon or she'll miss the opening ceremony.*

Note: Had better (negative and question forms)

The negative is formed with not after better.

Example:

- *You had better not miss the last bus. (It would be unwise to miss it, or I advise)*

The negative of had better is had better not (or 'd better not):

- *I'd better not leave my luggage there. Someone might steal it.*
- *You'd better not tell Mary about the broken crystal – she'll go wild!*

The question form of had better is made by inverting the subject and had.

- *Had I better speak to Tom first before I send this report? What do you think?*
- *Had we better leave a memo for the delivery girl to take the package next door?*

Negative questions with had better are more common than affirmative ones:

- *Hadn't we better get to the hospital and tell our friends that Fatima is sick?*
- *Hadn't we better study our grammar lesson? We might get confused if we leave it.*

Note: Had better X would rather or would prefer (Compare)

We don't use had better when we talk about preferences. We use would rather or would prefer.

Compare

- *I'd better get a taxi. The buses are so slow (It is a good idea or advisable)*
- *I'd rather get a taxi. I don't like buses (I prefer to get a taxi)*

Note: In indirect speech had better with the first or third person remains unchanged; had better with the second person can remain unchanged or be reported by advise +object+ infinitive.

Examples;

- *He said, 'I'd better hurry' = He said (that) he'd better hurry.*
- *He said, 'Ann had better hurry' = He said (that) Ann had better hurry.*
- *He said, 'You'd better hurry' = He said (that) I'd better hurry*

Note: Had better (main stream errors)

- We use had better to give specific advice, not to talk about obligations or requirements; instead, we use have to, have got to or must:
 - *You have to (or must) hold a full, valid driving license to hire a car.*
 - ~~*Not: You'd better hold a full, valid driving license to hire a car.*~~
- We don't use had better to talk about preferences; instead, we use would rather or would prefer:
 - *They offered him a job in a restaurant, but he said she'd rather work in a supermarket. (or ... he'd prefer to work ...)*
 - ~~*Not: ... she'd better work ...*~~
- We don't use had better to make ordinary suggestions or recommendations:
 - *Or is a great place to visit. He'd recommend you take a short trip and see some of its holy places. Then you can find a nice restaurant for lunch.*
 - ~~*Not: You'd better take a trip and see some of its holy places. Then you'd better find a nice restaurant for lunch.*~~

References Used:

Thomson, A. J., & Martinet, A. V. (1980). A practical English grammar. Oxford University Press.

Praninskas, J. (1975). Rapid review of English grammar: A text for students of English as a second language. Prentice-Hall.