

Curious Question #15 – Had Better

Transcript

Harp: Hello everyone, this is Harp...

Robin: And Robin...

Harp: And we are bringing you the **Curious Question** podcast at Culips.

Robin: At Culips! And this is where we take one of your English questions and we break it down and explain it to you as best we can.

Harp: If you don't understand everything, you go to the website, that is C-U-L-I-P-S.com, and you click on Lipservice and there you find Detailed Explanations, you find a transcript and then you quiz yourself at the end, definitely. Today's question!

Robin: Yeah, what is today's question, what are we looking at?

Harp: We are looking at a question from Jake. I don't know where he is from, he didn't give us the information, but basically his question is about the sentence: "*He **had better** go to work soon – it's getting late!*"

Robin: Hmm, "*He **had better** go to work soon – it's getting late!*" So, his question is about how to use the expression "**had better**," and what this expression means.

Harp: Well, his question had to do with the tense and the words "**had better**" and he was asking about whether it should be past perfect, what tense. The answer is that "**had better**" is a fixed expression, it is not related to verb tenses. "**Had better**" is always "**had better**."

Robin: Indeed, indeed, and you can forget about the tenses and stuff like this as long as you remember "**had better**" always goes together, everything is OK. Now do you have any examples?

Harp: Let's explain "**had better**" just a little bit. OK, so when you use "he **had better**," or "we **had better**" or "she **had better**," basically you are saying that they have to, they should, they must do something or...

Robin: Something bad will happen.

- Harp: Exactly! So it is a fixed expression to say that you have to do something or something bad will happen and the something bad, we don't always say that in the expression, you could say he **had better** do blah blah blah... you don't always have to say the bad part, the consequence.
- Robin: Absolutely, absolutely, and a perfect example is "Wow, this room it's caught fire, everything is burning, we **had better** leave." OK?
- Harp: Exactly, because it is implied that if we stay, we are going to be burned, we are going to die, something bad will happen.
- Robin: Something bad might happen. Probably will happen, actually. Can you think of any other examples, Harp?
- Harp: Well, the one that always comes to mind for me is my father always said "You'd **better** go to school or you will end up on the street." He always, always said this to me. My parents value education a lot.
- Robin: And it is interesting what you said: "you'd **better**." Now a lot of times in spoken English we don't say "you **had better**." It becomes a little bit long and in fact it sounds stronger when you say, "you **had better** go to school." A lot of times we just say "you'd **better**."
- Harp: Yeah, we contract it.
- Robin: Contract it, so, you'd **better**, she'd **better**, they'd **better** or in fact what we do a lot of times as well is we make it even shorter, we say, "**you better**." We get rid of the "**had**."
- Harp: Yes, definitely.
- Robin: They **better**, we **better**.
- Harp: So, another example is if it is raining outside "I'd **better** take my umbrella." That is it. But the full expression would be "I **had better** take an umbrella or I will get wet."
- Robin: If I don't take an umbrella I will get wet, therefore I'd **better** take an umbrella.
- Harp: What is another example?
- Robin: Your dentist might say to you, "you know you **better** floss because if you don't your teeth will drop out."

- Harp: Exactly, so they don't always say "...or your teeth will..." and they don't say "you'd **better**." Sometimes they say "you **better** floss your teeth," I think they expect you to know what will happen. So fixed expression, it never changes, well I guess it changes cause we contract it and make it smaller, but the meaning is always the same.
- Robin: Indeed! And I think that about does it for our explanation. I hope that we were able to explain everything to you in a way that you could understand. If you have any more questions, please check out our website, Culips.com.
- Harp: You'd **better** stop talking.
- Robin: OK, I think **we'd better** wrap up, let's go have some wine.
- Harp: Let's go!
- Robin: OK, take care everyone, have a good night.
- Harp: Bye everyone.

Detailed Explanation

Had go

In this question from Jake, he also asks about the past perfect verb tense. He was confused because this sentence used the word “had” and then “go.” As we know from this episode, we didn’t say “had go,” we said, “**had better.**”

On another note, Jake was right. We can never use “had” and then the simple form of the verb “go.” It would have to be “had gone” (past perfect verb tense) or “had to go” (the modal, like “must”).

Situations when we use “had better”

Here are some more specific descriptions of when you can use “**had better.**” In all these examples there are still bad consequences implied.

1. Giving strong advice

She **had better** do her homework.

(This sentence is stronger than “She should do her homework.”)

2. As a warning

You **had better** stay home tonight.

(This is said by a parent to their teenage child.)

3. Hope

He **had better** call me tonight.

(I hope he calls me tonight.)

4. Must do something (with urgency)

I **had better** do my homework.

(The work needs to be done right away.)

“Better” slang

“**Had better**” is often used as a contraction when native speakers are talking.

Instead of “They **had better** finish soon,” we say “They’**d better** finish soon.”

And as we talk fast, the “**d**” for “**had**” is not very important. This means we no longer pronounce the “**had**” or the “**d**.” We can say, “I **better** go to work now.”

“**Better**” and “**had better**” can have exactly the same meaning.

He **better** bring his movie back.

He **had better** bring his movie back.

Closest synonyms to “had better”

“**Had better**” does not have another expression that means exactly the same thing. The closest synonyms are “should” or “ought to.”

Verb tense with “had better”

This expression is always conjugated as the past “had.” We cannot say “have better.” It is conjugated in the past, but the meaning is always about the present or future. We cannot use “**had better**” to talk about the past.

Quiz (see the answers at the bottom of this Lipservice)

1. What does the expression “had better” mean?

- a) You should do something or there will be bad consequences.
- b) You don't have to do something.
- c) It is better to do something with bad consequences.
- d) You had something in the past with bad consequences.

2. You had better finish the assignment. If you don't do it _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) you will pass the course
- b) you will finish the assignment
- c) you will fail the course
- d) you will become the teacher

3. What is the slang term for “had better”?

- a) had bet
- b) better
- c) had
- d) had betty

4. Can we use “had better” to talk about the past?

- a) yes
- b) no
- c) sometimes

5. What is the closest synonym to “had better”?

- a) would
- b) could
- c) should
- d) mould

6. There might be a snow storm tonight and it could be dangerous. You had better _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) storm
- b) stay outside
- c) stay home
- d) drive all night

Answers: 1.a 2.c 3.b 4.b 5.b 6.c 7.c