**Modal Verbs**

**Modal and Modal Phrases (Semi-Modals)**

A modal is a type of [**auxiliary (helping) verb**](https://www.gingersoftware.com/content/grammar-rules/verbs/auxiliary-or-helping-verbs/) that is used to express: ability, possibility, permission or obligation. Modal phrases (or semi-modals) are used to express the same things as modals, but are a combination of auxiliary verbs and the preposition to. The modals and semi-modals in English are:

1. Can/could/be able to
2. May/might
3. Shall/should
4. Must/have to
5. Will/would

**Can, Could, Be Able To**

Can, could and be able to are used to express a variety of ideas in English:

**Ability/Lack of Ability**

**Present and Future:**

can/can’t + base form of the verb

1. Tom **can write** poetry very well.
2. I **can help** you with that next week.
3. Lisa can’t speak French.

am / is / are / will be + able to + base form of the verb  
am not/ isn’t / aren’t/ won’t be + able to + base form of the verb

1. Mike **is able to solve** complicated math equations
2. The support team **will be able to help** you in about ten minutes.
3. I **won’t be able to visit** you next summer.

**Past:**

could / couldn’t + base form of the verb

1. When I was a child I **could climb** trees.

was / were + able to + base form of the verb  
wasn’t / weren’t + able to + base form of the verb  
hasn’t / haven’t + been able to + base form of the verb

1. I **wasn’t able to visit** her in the hospital.
2. He **hasn’t been able to get** in touch with the client yet.

Note: Can and could do not take an infinitive (to verb) and do not take the future auxiliary will.

* Incorrect: I can to help you this afternoon.
* Correct: I **can help** you this afternoon.
* Correct: **I will (I’ll) be able to help** you this afternoon.

**Possibility / Impossibility**

can / can’t + base form of the verb

1. You can catch that train at 10:43.
2. He can’t see you right now. He’s in surgery.

could + base form of the verb

1. I **could fly** via Amsterdam if I leave the day before.

**Ask Permission / Give Permission**

Can + Subject + base form of the verb (informal)

1. **Can** you **lend** me ten dollars?

Can + base form of the verb (informal)

1. You **can borrow** my car.

Could + subject + base form of the verb (polite)

1. **Could** I **have** your number?
2. **Could** I **talk** to your supervisor please?

**Make a suggestion – To make a suggestion use:**

Could + base form of the verb (informal)

1. You **could take** the tour of the castle tomorrow.

**Exercises: Can, Could, Be able to**

**Q. Fill in the correct form of can, could or be able to as in the examples.**

1. Ben could not help his little brother with his homework yesterday.
2. Can I call you later tonight?
3. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Tony run long distances when he was a boy?
4. \_\_\_\_\_\_ you please call a tow truck for me? My car broke down. (polite)
5. The students \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to buy their textbooks today. The bookstore is all out of them.
6. \_\_\_\_\_\_ you teach me how to fix my computer? You’re so good at it.
7. \_\_\_\_\_\_ you \_\_\_\_\_\_ reach the customer if you call him at 4:00 his time?

**Answers:**

1. Could 2. Could 3. aren’t able 4.Can 5.Will/be able to

**May, Might**

**Formal Permission / Formal Prohibition**

may / may not + base form of the verb

1. You **may start** your exam now.
2. You **may not wear** sandals to work.

**Polite Request**

May + subject + base form of the verb

1. **May** I **help** you?

**Possibility / Negative Possibility**

may/ might + base form of the verb

1. We **may go out** for dinner tonight. Do you want to join us?
2. Our company **might get** the order if the client agrees to the price.

may not / might not + base form of the verb

1. Adam and Sue **may not buy** that house. It’s very expensive.
2. They **might not buy** a house at all.

**To Make a Suggestion (when there is no better alternative)**

may as well / might as well + base form of the verb

1. You **may as well come** inside. John will be home soon.
2. We **might as well take** Friday off. There’s no work to be done anyway.

**Polite Suggestion**

might + base form of the verb

1. You **might like to try** the salmon fillet. It’s our special today.

**Exercises: May / Might**

**Q. Fill in the correct form of may or might as in the example.**

1. May I sit here?
2. They \_\_\_\_\_\_ finish the project on time. The main engineer is ill.
3. You \_\_\_\_\_ want to stop by the museum gift shop on your way out.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ I have your autograph?
5. He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ visit the Louvre. He’s in Paris anyway.
6. You \_\_\_\_\_\_ park your car here. It’s reserved for guests of the hotel only.

**Answers:**

1. might not 2. Might 3. May 4. may as well 5. may not

**Shall, Should, Ought to**

**To Offer of Assistance or Polite Suggestion (When you are quite sure of a positive answer)**

Shall + subject + base form of the verb

1. **Shall** we **go** for a walk?

**Note:** Shall is only used with I or we. It is used instead of will only in formal English.

**To Offer of Assistance or Polite Suggestion (When you are not sure of a positive answer)**

Should + subject + base form of the verb

1. **Should** I **call** a doctor?

**A Prediction or Expectation that Something Will Happen**

should/shouldn’t + base form of the verb

1. The proposal **should be finished** on time.
2. I **shouldn’t be** late. The train usually arrives on time.

**To Give Advice**

should / ought to + base form of the verb

1. You **should check** that document before you send it out.
2. You **ought to have** your car serviced before the winter.

**To Give Advice (about something you think wrong or unacceptable)**

shouldn’t + base form of the verb

1. James **shouldn’t teach** him words like those.

**Exercises: Should, Shouldn’t, Ought To**

**Q. Fill in should, shouldn’t or ought in the following sentences as in the example.**

1. He shouldn’t encourage such bad behavior.
2. You \_\_\_\_\_ get your teeth cleaned at least once a year.
3. The house \_\_\_\_\_\_ be ready to move into by next month. It’s almost finished.
4. Ron \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to improve his attitude. If he doesn’t, he might get fired.
5. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ I get your jacket? It’s cold in here.
6. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ put your feet on the table. It’s not polite.

**Answers:**

1. should 2. should 3. ought 4. shall 5. shouldn’t

**Must, Have to, Need to, Don’t have to, Needn’t**

**Necessity or Requirement**

**Present and Future:**

must / have to / need to + base form of the verb

1. You **must have** a passport to cross the border.
2. Elisabeth **has to apply** for her visa by March 10th.
3. I **need to drop by** his room to pick up a book.

**Past:**

had to / needed to + base form of the verb

1. I **had to work** late last night.
2. I **needed to drink** a few cups of coffee in order to stay awake.

**Note:** have to and need to are often used in the same context, but many times, need to is used to express something that is less urgent, something in which you have a choice.

**Almost 100% Certain**

must + base form of the verb

1. Thomas has lived in Paris for years. His French **must** be very good.

**To Persuade**

must / have to + base form of the verb

1. You **must try** this wine. It’s excellent.
2. You **have to** visit us while you’re in town.

**Prohibited or Forbidden**

must not / mustn’t + base form of the verb

1. You **must not drive** over the speed limit.
2. You **mustn’t leave** medicines where children can get to them.

**Lack of Necessity**

don’t /doesn’t /didn’t + have to + base form of the verb

1. You **don’t have to park** the car. The hotel valet will do it for you.
2. Tim **doesn’t have to go** to school today. It’s a holiday.
3. You **didn’t have to shout**. Everyone could hear you.

needn’t + base form of the verb

1. You **needn’t worry** about me. I’ll be fine.

**Must, Have to, Need to, Don’t Have to, Needn’t**

**Q. Fill in the blanks with one of these modals:**  
must, must not, have to, has to, don’t have to, doesn’t have to, needn’t as in the examples.  
There may be more than one correct answer.

1. You \_\_\_\_\_\_ tell Anna about the party tomorrow night. It’s a surprise! (must not, need to, doesn’t have to)
2. Tina \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ register for her classes on Monday, otherwise she won’t get a place in them. (doesn’t have to, mustn’t, has to)
3. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ send that fax. I’ve already sent it. (must, will have to, don’t have to)
4. A dog \_\_\_\_\_\_ get special training in order to be a guide dog. (must, need to, don’t have to)
5. Jeremy \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ get up early tomorrow. His class was cancelled. (mustn’t, doesn’t have to, don’t need to)

**Answers:**

1. must not 2. has to 3. don’t have to 4. must 5. doesn’t have to

**Modals: Will / Would**

**will / won’t + base form of the verb**

1. John **will pick** you up at 7:00am.
2. Beth **won’t be** happy with the results of the exam.

**Polite Request or Statement**

Will / Would + base form of the verb

1. **Will** you please **take** the trash out?
2. **Would** you **mind** if I sat here?
3. **I’d (I would) like** to sign up for your workshop.

**Habitual Past Action**

Would/Wouldn’t + base form of the verb

1. When I was a child, I **would spend** hours playing with my train set.
2. Peter **wouldn’t eat** broccoli when he was a kid. He loves it now.

**Exercises: will, would**

**Q. Fill in the blanks with one of the following words: will, won’t, would, wouldn’t.**

1. Will you please help me lift this box?
2. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ like to order the onion soup please.
3. The manager \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be pleased to hear that a customer slipped on the wet floor.
4. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ it be okay if I slept here tonight?
5. When Igor lived in Russia, he \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ call his mother as often as he does now.
6. I can assure you sir, the order \_\_\_\_\_\_ be shipped out tonight.

**Answers:**

1. Would 2. won’t 3. Would 4. wouldn’t 5. Will

**Exercises – All Modals**

**Q. Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the following modals:**  
can, could, be able to, may, might, shall, should, must, have to, don’t have to, need to  
– You may have to make the modals negative according to the context of the sentence.  
– There may be more than one possibility.

1. He **has to** take his car to be serviced. The brakes are squeaking.
2. **Would** you please save me a seat at the dinner event.
3. If you are sick, you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ go to work. You’ll infect everyone there.
4. Drivers \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ stop at red lights.
5. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ finish the proposal today. You can finish it tomorrow.
6. She \_\_\_\_\_\_ hear much better with her new hearing aids.
7. \_\_\_\_\_\_ I order us a bottle of wine?
8. Sam \_\_\_\_\_\_ pick his daughter up from school. She’s taking the bus home.
9. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ smoke here. It’s a smoke-free building.
10. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ eat so many sweets. They are bad for you.
11. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you mind walking a little faster? We’re going to be late.
12. I’m sorry. I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ help you. I don’t know how to do it.

**Answers:**

1. **shouldn’t 2. Must 3. don’t have to 4. Can 5. Shall 6. needn’t**

**7. mustn’t 8. shouldn’t 9. Would 10. can’t**