Unit X: Modals of Deduction and Speculation (Must, May, Might, Could, Can't) A. Study this example situation: Imagine you are walking down the street and you see an old, small house. Suddenly, a brand new, very expensive sports car (like a Ferrari or a Lamborghini) pulls up and parks outside it.

The house looks old and small.

The car is very new and expensive.

Now, think about what you can deduce:

He must be very rich. (Strong certainty based on the expensive car)

He might be visiting someone. (A possibility, as he's at an old house)

He can't live there. (Strong certainty that he doesn't live in such a small, old house if he owns such an expensive car, given the typical association of wealth with large houses)

B. Understanding Modals of Deduction and Speculation We use modal verbs (like must, may, might, could, can't) to express how certain we are about something – whether we are sure it's true, sure it's not true, or think it's possible. These are deductions or speculations based on the evidence we have.

1. Must (for strong certainty - positive) We use must when we are almost 100% sure that something is true, based on the evidence available.

Structure: Subject + must + base form of the verb

Examples:

She must be tired. (She's yawning a lot.)

That must be John. (I recognise his voice.)

They must work very hard. (They've finished the project in record time.)

1. May / Might / Could (for possibility - positive) We use may, might, or could when we think something is possible, but we are not certain. There's a chance it's true, but also a chance it's not. Might often suggests a slightly lower possibility than may or could.

Structure: Subject + may/might/could + base form of the verb

Examples:

It may rain later. (The sky is looking cloudy.)

He might be stuck in traffic. (He's usually on time.)

She could be at home. (I'll try calling her there.)

1. Can't (for strong certainty - negative / impossibility) We use can't when we are almost 100% sure that something is NOT true or is impossible, based on the evidence.

Structure: Subject + can't + base form of the verb

Examples:

That can't be true. (What you're saying is completely illogical.)

He can't know about the surprise party. (He looked genuinely shocked.)

They can't live in that tiny apartment. (There are five of them!)

C. Using Modals with 'be' and 'have' These modals combine naturally with be (for states, identities, or descriptions) and have (for possession). They can also be used with the present continuous (be + -ing) to talk about ongoing actions.

With 'be':

She must be exhausted.

He might be a doctor.

They can't be serious.

With 'have':

He must have a lot of money to buy that car.

She may have an allergy.

You can't have enough time to finish all that work today.

With present continuous (for ongoing actions):

The lights are on – they must be working late.

Don't call now, she might be sleeping.

He can't be studying right now; his music is really loud!

D. Past Deduction and Speculation (Modals + have + past participle) To make deductions or speculations about past events, we use the structure: modal + have + past participle.

1. Must have (for strong certainty about the past - positive) Structure: Subject + must have + past participle

Examples:

He must have forgotten his keys. (The door is unlocked, but he's not inside.)

They must have missed the bus. (They're very late.)

1. May / Might / Could have (for possibility about the past - positive) Structure: Subject + may/might/could have + past participle

Examples:

She may have left her phone at the restaurant. (She can't find it.)

They might have gone to the beach. (It's a sunny day.)

He could have helped us. (He was there, but he didn't.)

1. Can't have (for strong certainty about the past - negative / impossibility) Structure: Subject + can't have + past participle

Examples:

You can't have finished already! (That was a huge task.)

She can't have known about the problem. (Otherwise, she would have said something.)

E. Summary of Usage Modal

Degree of Certainty

Usage

Example (Present)

Example (Past)

Must

High (Positive)

Almost certain something is true

He must be at home. (Lights are on.)

He must have arrived already.

May/Might/Could

Medium (Positive)

Possible, but not certain

She may be busy.

She might have forgotten.

Can't

High (Negative)

Almost certain something is not true or impossible

They can't know the answer. (It's new.)

They can't have seen us. (We were hidden.)

Important Note: Couldn't is generally used for past ability (I couldn't swim when I was three) rather than past deduction (can't have). For past impossibility/deduction, can't have is the correct choice.

Exercises 2.1 Complete the sentences using must, may/might/could, or can't. Look at the dark clouds. It \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ rain soon.

She's been working for 12 hours straight. She \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be exhausted.

He just told me he hates chocolate. He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be a real chocolate lover, then!

I don't know where Sarah is. She \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be at the library or at the café.

That noise \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be our neighbour practising the drums. He's terrible!

My phone isn't ringing. You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be calling the wrong number.

2.2 Rewrite the sentences using a modal of past deduction (must have, can't have, may/might have). I'm sure she went to bed early. (She looked very sleepy.) She \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

It's impossible that he stole the money. (He was with me all day.) He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Perhaps they decided to stay home. (They didn't answer the door.) They \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

I'm sure he passed the exam. (He studied incredibly hard.) He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

It's possible she didn't receive your email. (She hasn't replied.) She \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

2.3 Choose the best modal verb to complete each sentence. That restaurant is always full. The food \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be delicious. a) might b) can't c) must

I haven't seen Mark for days. He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be on holiday. a) could b) can't c) must

Don't knock on the door; they \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ be sleeping. It's very late. a) must b) may c) can't

She just bought a new car. She \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ have won the lottery! a) can't b) must c) could

My keys aren't here. I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ have left them at work. a) must b) can't c) might

2.4 Create sentences using modals of deduction/speculation based on the given information. (Evidence: Your friend is wearing a very expensive new watch.) (Deduction about wealth): He \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

(Evidence: The train arrived 30 minutes late.) (Speculation about a problem): There \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

(Evidence: You haven't seen your neighbours' car for a week.) (Speculation about their whereabouts): They \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

(Evidence: The child has chocolate all over their face.) (Deduction about eating chocolate): They \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

(Evidence: You call your friend, but their phone is off.) (Speculation about battery/location): Their phone \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

2.5 Complete using a modal verb and the correct form of the verb in parentheses. The lights are off. They must be sleeping (sleep).

She failed the exam. She can't have studied (study) enough.

He isn't answering the phone. He may be driving (drive).

The cake is gone. Someone must have eaten (eat) it all.

He didn't look happy. He might have received (receive) bad news.

It's only 5 AM. The shops can't be open (open) yet.