

May, Might, Must - Modals of Certainty and Hope

For VOA Learning English, this is Everyday Grammar.

This week's Everyday Grammar looks at how to use the modals *may*, *must*, and *might*.

Modal verbs (called *modals* for short) are **auxiliary verbs** that express a speaker's **attitude** and the strength of that attitude. There are about 17 modals in English. They have multiple meanings and sometimes overlap in ways that are confusing to English learners. Today we will look at how we use these modals to express how **certain**, or sure, you are of something.



Google Ngram of "may you"

Degrees of certainty in the present and past

Grammar expert Betty Azar explains that these modals tell us how sure speakers are about what they are saying. A person who is 100% sure uses the verb *be* as in "I am sick." If they are mostly sure, say 95%, they will use the modal *must*, as in "I *must* be sick." When speakers are about 50% sure, they will use the modals *may*, *might*, or *could*; as in "I *may* be sick. I *might* be sick. I *could* be sick."

Might as the past tense of may

Might is used as the past form of *may*. For example:

"I *may* take more pictures." (This is a direct quote)
 She said she *might* take more pictures. (This is reported speech)

Notice how *may* changed to *might*. Modals change to a past form in **reported speech**.

Yesterday we had a staff meeting. I looked around the room and noticed my co-worker Anna was not there. I asked, "Where's Anna?" and got three answers from my co-workers.

Jonathan answered, "Oh, she *may* be making a video in the studio."
 Kelly said, "She *might* have stayed home today."
 Adam told us, "She called me to say she was doing an interview at the Capitol this morning. So she *must* still be working over there."

In this conversation, you can see a change from *may* to *might*. *May* shows the speaker is not sure in the present moment: "She *may* be making a video." *May* changes to *might* to express a possible

state in the past: "She *might* have stayed home." Finally, *must* expresses a strong certainty: "She *must* be working there."

People today do not always follow these rules about present and past tense for *may* and *might*. You will hear both words to express the same degree of certainty. English speakers still express strong certainty in phrases like, "It *must* be love."

Listen for the word *might* in this [song by The Cars](#).

*You might think it's foolish
or maybe it's untrue
You might think I'm crazy
but all I want is you*

By using *might*, the singer is expressing about 50% certainty.

Degrees of uncertainty in the future

Now let's look at how we express certainty about the future.

My friend Andy has a test next week. He has studied very hard for months. I told him, "You *will* do well on the test. Don't worry." I believe with 100% certainty that Andy will pass the test.

On the other hand, Carrie, who has to take the same test, just began studying last week. I warned her, "You *might* not do well on the test. You should study more this weekend." I am not so sure that Carrie will pass. In fact, I doubt it. I express that future possibility with *might*.

May is sometimes used to express hope

The idea of possible future events lets English speakers use *may* to talk about hopes. You will see *may* on greeting cards and in prayers or religious writings.

A quick look at Google Ngrams shows that few people are using *may* in this way. Now, it is much more common to hear "I hope that."

The group *Celtic Woman* sings of their wishes in May it Be:

*May it be an evening star,
Shines down upon you.
May it be when darkness falls,
Your heart will be true.*

Traditional poems and prayers also use *may* to express **positive** sentiments. This is part of an old Irish blessing:

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind always be at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face.*

With that in mind, the Everyday Grammar team says, "May you find our articles useful."

I'm Jill Robbins.

And I'm Adam Brock.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this story for Learning English. Adam Brock was the editor.

Words in This Story

certain - *adj.* not having any doubt about something; convinced or sure

positive - *adj.* thinking that a good result will happen: hopeful or optimistic

modal verb - a verb (such as *can*, *could*, *shall*, *should*, *ought to*, *will*, or *would*) that is usually used with another verb to express ideas such as possibility, necessity, and permission

auxiliary verb - a verb (such as *have*, *be*, *may*, *do*, *shall*, *will*, *can*, or *must*) that is used with another verb to show the verb's tense, to form a question, etc.

Now it's your turn. Write a sentence using may, might, or must. We'll check your grammar in the comments section.