

You Had Better Learn Modals!

For VOA Learning English, this is Everyday Grammar.

This week we are going to show you how to give advice using **modal verbs**. Modal verbs (called *modals* for short) are **auxiliary verbs** that express a speaker's **attitude** and the strength of that attitude. For example, "He should visit Prague."

In this sentence, *should* is the modal verb, and *visit* is the main verb.

The simple form of a verb goes after a modal. Do not add the third person "s" to a verb after a modal. It would sound strange to say "He should visits Prague" or "He should to visit Prague." The correct way is "He should visit Prague."

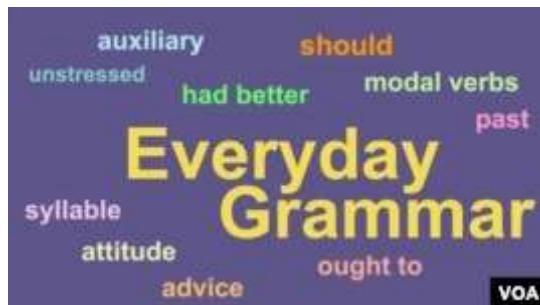
There are about 17 modals in English—grammar experts do not agree on an exact number. Today we will focus on three common modals used for giving advice: *should*, *ought to*, and *had better*.

Using *should*

Let's start with *should*. *Should* has multiple meanings. It can be used to express **certainty**, such as, "He should be here by five o'clock." *Should* can be a substitute for the **conditional** word *if*. You might hear someone say, "Should you need help, just ask me."

But more often, we use *should* to give suggestions and friendly advice, such as "You should apply for that job" or "You should try that new restaurant."

The past form of the modal *should* is *should have* + the past participle. For example, "I should have brought my wallet." Notice that the main verb *brought* is in the **past participle** form. Use *should have* to express regret, or a negative feeling about the past. Imagine you trusted someone and that person later cheated on you. You could say, "I should have known better than to trust him." The Beatles used the expression in a popular song.



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*I should have known better with a girl like you
That I would love everything that you do
And I do
Hey hey hey*

Using *ought to*

The next modal we will talk about is *ought to*. *Ought to* is another modal for giving advice. Sometimes *ought to* sounds more like "otta" as in this romantic song by Al Green.

*Sit back down and talk to me
About how you want to be
You ought to be with me
Yeah you ought to be with me*

Ought to is similar in meaning to *should*, but it is not used as often. In modern American English, *ought to* is seldom used with the past tense or in the question form.

Using *had better*

Let's move on to *had better*. *Had better* is stronger than *should* and *ought to*. *Had better* carries an indirect threat. For example, if you said, "You had better finish the report," you are not making a polite suggestion. You are making an indirect threat. In other words, if you don't finish the report, you are in trouble. Authority figures sometimes use *had better* when speaking to people below them. Parents also use this form often.

Listen to cartoon character Malory Archer. Malory is the head of a spy agency. People think she is **arrogant** and heartless. Listen to her tone when she uses *had better*.

*Oh for—I'll send up some help.
And Missy, you had better watch it!*

As you can hear, Malory is not making a polite suggestion. She is threatening someone in a lower position.

Had better is not always impolite, it could express a sense of urgency as in, "Your plane is leaving! You *had better* run!" In other words, "If you don't run, you will miss your flight." *Had better* has no past tense or question form.

Modals in rapid speech

Should, *ought to*, and *had better* can be difficult for English learners to hear. Native speakers often shorten these words in casual conversation. In rapid speech, modals seem to disappear because they are shortened and often fall on **unstressed syllables**.

We will read some examples for you. The first sentence will be in slow, careful speech. Then we will read it again in rapid, informal speech.

*I should have been listening to what she had to say.
I shoulda been listenin' ta what she had t' say.*

*You ought to be ashamed of yourself.
You otta be ashamed of yourself.*

*You had better decide what you want to do.
You'd better decide whatcha wanna do.*

That's all the advice we have for you today. There is much more to learn about modals. We will cover them in more detail in future episodes. Until then, you should practice modals with British punk band, The Clash.

*Darling you've got to let me know
Should I stay or should I go
If you say that you are mine*

*I'll be here till the end of time
So you've got to let me know
Should I stay or should I go*

I'm Pete Musto.

And I'm Jill Robbins.

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

Words in This Story

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.

attitude – *n.* the way you think and feel about someone or something

certainty – *n.* the state of being or feeling about how likely it is that something will happen

conditional – *adj.* showing or used to show that something is true or happens only if something else is true or happens

past participle - the form of the verb that is used with "have" in perfect tenses and with "be" in passive constructions

arrogant – *adj.* having or showing the insulting attitude of people who believe that they are better, smarter, or more important than other people

unstressed – *adj.* not having an accent

syllable – *n.* any one of the parts into which a word is naturally divided when it is pronounced

*Now it's your turn. Think of a friend that you would like to give advice. Write to us in the comments section. Write two sentences - using *should*, *ought to*, or *had better* - giving advice. We'll give you feedback.*