

Can I, Could I, May I?

For VOA Learning English, this is Everyday Grammar.

This week we will give you some tips on how to use **modals** to make requests and give **permission**. Some common modals for expressing permission are *may*, *can*, and *could*. But these modals have multiple meanings that can be confusing for English learners.

Can and May

Children in American schools learn to use the modal *may* when asking for permission. A student might ask the teacher, "May I be excused?" before leaving the room. When students asked, "Can I leave the room?" their teachers often made a joke, "You *can*, but you *may* not." The teacher was saying the student is *able* to leave the room, but does not have *permission* to do so. *May* is the most formal way to ask for permission. The **distinction** between *can* and *may* is slowly disappearing in English.



Everyday Grammar - Modals of Permission

These days, it is not always clear if *may* is being used to express permission or possibility—or both. Let's look at some examples in the language of Internet **privacy** policies. When you visit a website for the first time, you often see a popup box asking for permission to collect information about you. Privacy laws in some countries require websites to tell you what information is collected and how it will be used. A common privacy statement includes this sentence: "We *may* collect various types of information...when you visit any of our sites."

Let's see what this legal language really means. "We *may* collect information..." means that you give the company permission to collect information about you. In other words, you **allow** the company to save your email address or your computer's address.

But *may* has multiple meanings. In addition to expressing permission, *may* also expresses possibility. For example, "It *may* rain" means that there is a possibility of rain.

Let's go back to our privacy example. "We *may* collect various types of information...when you visit any of our sites." The policy contains some clever legal language. "We *may* collect information" means "We have permission to collect information." But it could also mean, "There is a possibility that we will collect information." One could make an argument for both meanings. As an Internet user, you should assume both meanings of *may* are part of the policy.

Could and May

A third modal for making polite requests is *could*. For example, "Could I please have some water?" *Could* is the past tense of *can*. However, when asking for permission, *could* does not have a past tense meaning. *Could* has the same meaning as *may* when making requests. It is equally polite to say "Could I leave early?" or "May I leave early?"

Could is used with any subject to ask for permission. For example "Could I open the window?" or "Could you open the window?" are both grammatical.

Be careful with *may*. When making a request using *may*, only *I* can be the subject. If you are making a formal request to dance with someone, you would say, "May I have this dance?" not "May you have this dance?" *May* followed by *you* does not express a request; it expresses a wish, as in "May you live long."

But that's another episode. Until next time, we'll leave you a song of permission by the Temptations.

May I have this dance

May I, may, may I have this dance

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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

permission - *n.* the right or ability to do something that is given by someone who has the power to decide if it will be allowed or permitted

distinction – *n.* the separation of people or things into different groups

privacy – *n.* the state of being away from public attention

pop-up – *adj.* computers : appearing on the screen over another window or document

allow - *v.* to permit (something) : to regard or treat (something) as acceptable

formal - *adj. of language:* suitable for serious or official speech and writing

A Game to Learn "May"

A traditional children's game is called "Mother May I?" One child plays the Mother or Father at one end of a room or a yard. The other children start on the opposite side in a line. The goal of the game is to get to the place where the Mother or Father stands. The Mother/Father player gives one player instructions, such as "Take three giant steps." The player must ask for permission to move forward by saying, "Mother, may?" The Mother/ Father says, "Yes, you may" or "No, you may not." If the player moves without asking for permission, that player has to go back to the starting line. This game helps children to remember two things - to ask permission and to be polite.

Now it's your turn. Write one sentence politely asking for permission.