

Grammar Reference

'Might', 'may' and 'could' for possibility

Meaning and use

We use **might + verb**, **may + verb** or **could + verb** to talk about the possibility of something in the present or the future, when we are making a guess about a present situation, or we aren't sure if something will happen in the future.

*I **might go** to the exhibition at the Tate this afternoon.* (future)

*He's travelling in Eastern Europe. He **may be** in Ukraine by now.* (present)

*We **could have** some problems later this year.* (future)

There is almost no difference in meaning between **might**, **may** and **could**.

We use **might not/mightn't** and **may not** to talk about negative possibility. We don't usually use a contraction for **may not**. We cannot use **could not/couldn't** for possibility in the same way as **might not** and **may not** (see **Take note** below).

*We **might not move** into the new offices until the New Year.*

*Our client **may not agree** with our suggestions.*

Form

We use **might/may/could + infinitive without 'to'** or **might not/mightn't/may not + infinitive without 'to'**. They are the same for all persons (*I, you, he, she*, etc.).

Positive

*They are warning that storms **could hit** most of the country later today.*

*There **might be** some delays on the railways as a result.*

Negative

*Many people **may not be able to** get to work at all.*

*It **mightn't** affect us as badly as they say.*

Question

It is possible to ask questions with **Might/May/Could + subject + infinitive without 'to'**, but it is more common to form a question with **Do you think + subject + might/may/could + infinitive without 'to'**.

*Do you think he **might/may/could be** in Ukraine by now?*

*(**Might/May/Could he be** in Ukraine by now?)*

Take note: couldn't

We don't use **couldn't** in the same way as **might not/mightn't/may not**. 'Couldn't' means that something is impossible.

WRONG: *I think there **couldn't be** any trains today, so I'm going by bus.*

CORRECT: *I think there **mightn't be** any trains today, so I'm going by bus.*

Take note: 'might', 'may' and 'could' for permission

Might, **may** and **could** for permission are different from **might**, **may** and **could** for possibility. For permission with **might**, **may** and **could**, the question form is **Might/May/Could I + infinitive without 'to'**. **Might** for permission is very formal.

***Could/May/Might I come** with you to the exhibition?*

Spoken English

Might, **may** and **could** are modal verbs. When we say modal verbs, we usually say them quickly without emphasis. We don't pronounce the 't' or 'd' in **might** and **could** or the 't' at the end of **mightn't** and **couldn't**.

*They **might get** here late.*

*We **mightn't watch** the whole film.*

*It **couldn't be** Pete you saw because he's in Greece.*

