We can use the modal verbs **might, may, could, must** and **can't** for talking about what we think is possible or true in the present. We don't know for sure, so we make guesses and suggestions using the information that we have. Usually you can use **might, may** and **could** in the same way.

*There **might/may/could be** life forms on Mars.*
*There's some gas on the planet that **may/might/could suggest** this.*

We can also use **might, may** and **could** for talking about what we think was possible in the past.

*NASA says it **may/might/could have been** suitable for life in the past.*

Might not (**mightn't**) and **may not** are used for talking about negative possibility.

*Their information **might not/may not be** correct.*
*They **mightn't have got** correct data.*

But **couldn't** is different. It means that something is completely impossible.

*Other scientists say that there **couldn't be** life on Mars.*
*The gas **couldn't be coming** from living organisms.*

We use the modal verbs **must** and **can't** in the present and the past when we believe strongly that something is certain.

*Oh, it **can't be** true! (I believe strongly that it isn't true).*
*There **must be** another explanation. (I believe there's another explanation.)*
*They **must have made** a mistake! (I believe they have made a mistake.)*

Form

Present positive

The present positive is **might / may / could / must** + the infinitive of the verb **be** or another verb. Or the continuous **be** + **verb-ing.**

*The information **might be** correct.*
*They **must know** that it isn't possible.*
*Bacteria-like organisms **could be producing** the gas.*

Present negative

The present negative is **might not / mightn't / may not / can't / couldn't** + the infinitive of the verb **be** or another verb. Or the continuous **be** + **verb-ing.**

*Their information **may not be** correct.*
*They **can't have got** the correct data.*
*The gas **couldn't be coming** from living organisms.*

Past positive

The past positive is **might / may / could / must** + **have** + **been** or the past participle of another verb. Or the continuous **been** + **verb-ing.**

*There **must have been** water on Mars in the past.*
*Something **might have existed** there.*
*Who knows what **could have been living** in that lake?*

Past negative

The past negative is **might not / mightn't / may not / can't / couldn't** + **have** + **been** or the past participle of another verb. Or the continuous **been** + **verb-ing.**

*There **may not have been** anything in the lake.*
*Scientists **can't have found** anything definite.*
*They **mightn't have been looking** in the right area.*

Take note: questions

We don't usually form questions about what is possible or true with **might, may** or **must**. It's more common to use **Could** or **Do you think …?**

***Could** the data **be** incorrect? **Do you think** it's incorrect?*

Take note: can't and couldn't

We can use **can't have** and **couldn't have** in the same way.