

Modals: obligation and necessity

Use	Modal	Example
Expressing obligation or necessity	<i>must / have to / need to</i>	<i>I must / have to / need to pick up that prescription from the chemist on the way home.</i>
Expressing lack of obligation or necessity	<i>needn't / don't have to / don't need to</i>	<i>You needn't / don't have to / don't need to pick up that prescription from the chemist as I'll get it while I'm in town.</i>
Expressing past obligation	<i>had to</i>	<i>I had to take the pills three times a day for two weeks.</i>
Expressing lack of past obligation	<i>needn't (+ perfect infinitive) / didn't have to / didn't need to</i>	<i>I needn't have gone / didn't have to go / didn't need to go to the doctor.</i>

Watch out!

- There is usually no difference in meaning between *must* and *have to*. However, we are sometimes more likely to use *must* for personal obligation (making our own decision about what we must do) and *have to* for external obligation (someone else making a decision about what we must do).
- We can also use *will have/need to* to express future obligation.
✓ *You'll **have/need to** be more careful about what you eat in future.*
- It is unusual to use *must* for questions. We usually use *have/need to*.
✓ ***Do I have/need to** take this medicine before every meal?*
- *Must* cannot be used as an infinitive. Use *to have to*.
✓ *I'd **hate to have to** have injections every day.*
✗ *~~I'd hate to must have injections every day.~~*
- *Mustn't* and *don't/doesn't have/need to* have different meanings.
✓ *You **mustn't** do that! (Don't do that!)*
✓ *You **don't have/need to** do that. (You can do that if you want to but it's not necessary.)*
- *Needn't (+ perfect infinitive)* always refers to an action that happened.
Didn't have to and *didn't need to* can refer to actions that did or didn't happen.
✓ *I **needn't have gone** to the doctor. (I went but it wasn't necessary.)*
✓ *I **didn't have/need to** go to the doctor because I suddenly felt better. (I didn't go.)*
✓ *I **didn't have/need to** go to the doctor but I went just to be on the safe side. (I did go.)*
- Be careful with the verb *need*. It can also take the *-ing* form.
✓ *I **need to** sterilise this syringe.*
✓ *This syringe **needs** sterilising.*

Modals: degrees of certainty

Use	Modal	Example
Expressing certainty (or near certainty) about now or generally	<i>must can't couldn't</i>	<i>That must be the district nurse at the door. These can't / couldn't be the pills; they're the wrong colour.</i>
Expressing certainty (or near certainty) about the past	<i>must can't couldn't (+ perfect infinitive)</i>	<i>She must have been in a lot of pain. His leg can't / couldn't have been in plaster for two years!</i>
Expressing probability about now, the future or generally	<i>should ought to</i>	<i>You ought to / should feel better in a few days, as long as you get lots of rest.</i>
Expressing probability about the past	<i>should ought to (+ perfect infinitive)</i>	<i>The bruise ought to / should have disappeared days ago. I wonder why it didn't.</i>
Expressing possibility about now, the future or generally	<i>could may might</i>	<i>You should talk to your doctor first because that diet could / may / might be dangerous.</i>
Expressing possibility about the real past	<i>could may might (+ perfect infinitive)</i>	<i>That could / may / might have been the doctor who rang earlier while we were out.</i>
Expressing possibility about a hypothetical past	<i>could might (+ perfect infinitive)</i>	<i>It's a good thing you went to the doctor or you could / might have become quite ill.</i>