

# 14

## modals (2): possibility, certainty

### can / could

- We use **can** to make statements about what is generally possible.  
*It **can** be very cold here in winter. (= it is sometimes)*
- We use **could** to refer to past possible situations.  
*In those days, ships **could** travel for weeks on end without seeing land.*
- We use **easily** to emphasize a possibility with **could**.  
*People **could easily** fall down these stairs in the dark.*
- We use **could always** to point out a possible choice or decision.  
*You **could always** phone her when we get to the cinema.*
- We use **can** or **could** when we ask questions about possibility.  
*Who **can / could** that be outside Mr Smith's office?*
- We use **can hardly** or **could hardly** when we think something is impossible.  
*It **can / could hardly** be Jane Thompson. She's in Berlin this week.*
- We use **can only** or **could only** when we are sure about the answer.  
*It **can / could only** be the new sales manager.*

### may, might, could

- We use **may, might** or **could** to describe what is possible in particular situations. They are common with **be**.  
*This **may / might / could** be the last time I ever see you.*  
*The car won't start. The battery **may / might / could** be dead.*
- We often add **well** or **just** between **may / might / could** and the verb to emphasize the possibility. **Just** makes the possibility less likely.  
*You **may / might / could well** have the answer! (Perhaps it's possible)*  
*Your plan **may / might / could just** work! (It's unlikely, but possible)*
- We use **may / might as well** when we say that there is no reason for not doing something, usually because we are disappointed something else has not happened.  
*There's no point waiting for the bus any longer. **We might as well** start walking.*
- We can use **may not** or **might not** for negative possibilities. We cannot use **could not** for this meaning.  
*I **may / might not** be here tomorrow. I **may / might not** have time to come.*
- We use **may have, might have, and could have** for possible events in the past.  
*Jack isn't here yet. He **may / might / could** have missed the train.*
- The negative forms are **may not have, might not have**. We cannot use **could not have**.  
*Perhaps he's still at home. He **may not have got** our message.*
- We use **might have** and **could have** to show annoyance, when someone fails to do something we feel they should have done.  
*You **might have** told me the match was cancelled! I went all the way there for nothing!*
- We use **might have** and **could have** when we are shocked because something nearly happened.  
*Thank heavens he's safe! He **could have** drowned!*

### can't be, couldn't be

- We use **can't** or **couldn't** when we are certain that something is impossible.  
*That definitely **can't be / couldn't be** Tom over there. He's in Canada.*

### must be

- We use *must* when we are certain something is true.  
*You **must be** tired after working so hard.*  
*There **must be** some mistake. I definitely booked a table for five.*

### can't have done, couldn't have done

- We use *can't have* or *couldn't have* when we are certain that something in the past was impossible.  
*Helen **can't have taken** / **couldn't have taken** the car. She didn't have the keys.*
- We use *surely* to emphasize that we can't believe what has happened.  
*Surely you **can't have carried** all these bags on your own!*
- We use *can't have been* / *couldn't have been* when we are sure something wasn't true. We can also use *could* / *can* with *hardly* and *only*.  
*That **can't have been** successful. (I'm sure it wasn't)*  
*That **could hardly have been** an easy thing to do. (I'm sure it wasn't)*  
*Judging by the pawprints, it **can only have been** a very large animal.*

### must have done

- We use *must have* when we are certain something in the past was true.  
*I can't find my wallet. I **must have dropped it** in the supermarket.*



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### be bound to, be sure to, be certain to

- When we need to describe a future event which we are sure will happen, we use *be bound to*, *be sure to* or *be certain to*.  
*We're going to the seaside tomorrow, so **it's bound to rain**.*  
*Don't worry about the exam. **You're sure to pass!***

### should, ought to

- We use *should*, *ought to* to describe something we think is probably true, or has failed to happen.  
*There **ought to be** a car-park at the end of this road. (I think there is)*  
*There **should be** a turning here! (but there isn't)*

### should have, ought to have

- We use *should have*, *ought to have* when we describe what we expect has probably happened, or believe has failed to happen.  
*They **should have arrived** in London by now. (that's probable)*  
*The plane **ought to have landed**. Where is it? (it hasn't landed)*

1 Choose the correct form, A, B or C, to complete the sentence.

- a Why don't you phone Katie now? She A yet.
- b Take some sun-block and wear a hat, as it ..... get very hot in the middle of the day.
- c There's no point waiting here any longer. We ..... go and have something to eat.
- d Lucky you managed to hang on to that tree. You ..... down the cliff.
- e 'What am I going to do about a present for Carol?' 'You ..... some flowers.'
- f I don't know what time I'll be home. I ..... be quite late, I'm afraid.
- g Don't worry about your driving test. You ..... to pass.
- h There's no sign of the dog anywhere. Someone ..... it out.
- i Why don't you ask Nick about it? He ..... know the answer, I suppose.
- j There must be some kind of technical problem. The film ..... by now.

- |                          |                      |                         |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| a A can't have left      | B must have left     | C might have left       |
| b A must                 | B can                | C could have            |
| c A can hardly           | B are bound to       | C might as well         |
| d A could have fallen    | B must have fallen   | C may have fallen       |
| e A might have sent her  | B must have sent her | C could always send her |
| f A must                 | B can                | C may                   |
| g A may                  | B must               | C are bound to          |
| h A is bound to have let | B must have let      | C can let               |
| i A can                  | B may as well        | C might                 |
| j A should have started  | B must have started  | C might have started    |

2 Choose the best continuation 1 to 10 for sentences a to j.

- a I'm still waiting for the money the bank is supposed to have sent me. 3
- b There's still no sign of Alex. ....
- c It's getting rather late to deal with this now. ....
- d I wish you wouldn't leave your bag near the door like that. ....
- e You'd better take your umbrella with you. ....
- f This piece is the right shape, but it doesn't fit. ....
- g There should be a filling station here. ....
- h It's a very long book. ....
- i Oh sorry, yes, these are your keys. ....
- j Leave yourself plenty of time for the journey. ....

- 1 You're bound to need it if you don't.
- 2 Surely you can't have finished it already!
- ~~3 It should have got here by now.~~
- 4 It can take quite a long time in the rush hour.
- 5 It can't be the right one after all.
- 6 That's strange! I can't see one anywhere!
- 7 You could always come back tomorrow.
- 8 He may have missed the train I suppose.
- 9 I must have picked them up by mistake.
- 10 Someone could easily fall over it and hurt themselves.

3 Write a new sentence with the same meaning, beginning as shown.

- a Running is not allowed on the stairs. There is a danger of accidents.  
Running is not allowed on the stairs. You could / might have an accident.
- b You'd better not use this ladder. Look at it! I'm sure it's not safe.  
You'd better not use this ladder. Look at it! It .....
- c I think I know how this window got broken. I'm sure someone kicked a ball against it.  
I think I know how this window got broken. Someone .....
- d Unless you follow instructions, it's possible for a gymnasium to be a dangerous place.  
Unless you follow instructions, a gymnasium .....
- e I've turned off the electricity. I'm sure it's safe to touch these wires now.  
I've turned off the electricity. It .....
- f Ouch! Why didn't you tell me that piece of metal was hot!  
Ouch! You .....
- g Where are the fire fighters? I expected them to have arrived by now.  
Where are the fire fighters? They .....
- h I'm sure you didn't clean this bowl properly.  
You ..... I can see stains on it.

history

4 Complete the text using one of the phrases 1–10 in each gap.

1 can't have set off 2 could easily be 3 could expect 4 ~~must have been~~  
5 can't have been 6 could easily sail 7 might have 8 must have made  
9 should have reached 10 might involve

## 16th-century explorers

Imagine what it a 4 like to have sailed around the world in a small wooden ship, as Drake and his men did in 1577–1580. On a ship only some 35 metres long, it b ..... easy for the 80 or so crew to live comfortably. Exploration was part of war and rivalry with other nations, so these voyages c ..... attacks on other ships and towns, and had to make a profit. There were all the usual dangers too. A ship d ..... destroyed by a storm or run out of food and water, and the captain e ..... little idea of where the ship was or where it was going. Explorers f ..... many wrong decisions in an age when there were only basic maps and navigation equipment, and in unknown parts of ocean where a ship g ..... for weeks without reaching land. Very often places they thought they h ..... turned out to be much further on, or in a different direction. However, they i ..... on such long voyages without some general idea of the places they j ..... to reach along the way, and as knowledge of navigation improved, voyages became more and more successful.



GLOSSARY

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Write some sentences about these situations.

You notice that a large crowd of people has gathered outside, shouting and singing.

Who could they be? What could have happened? What might happen next?

You hear a knock at the door, and when you open it there is a large parcel outside.

Who could have sent it? What could it contain? What might you have to do next?

Need more practice? Go to the **Review** on page 208.