

B Grammar

Modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, must, will, would, shall, should, ought to, need*) are auxiliary verbs that give information about ability, possibility or necessity.

Modal verbs are followed by the infinitive without *to* and their form doesn't change:

He could speak French and Italian. (not He coulds speak)

Could you speak French before you lived there? (not Did you could speak)

1 Ability

We use the following verbs to talk about ability:

Present	<i>can, can't, be able to, manage to</i>	<i>I can't swim.</i>
Past	<i>could, couldn't, be able to, manage to</i>	<i>They weren't able to find out his name.</i>
Perfect	<i>be able to, manage to</i>	<i>Have you managed to finish the report yet?</i>
Future	<i>be able to, manage to</i>	<i>I won't be able to meet you later.</i>

It is more common to use *can/could* to talk about general ability in the present and past than *be able to*:

Can you remember much about it? (= Are you able to remember?)

He could speak French and Italian, but he couldn't remember his name.

To talk about ability on one specific occasion in the past we use *couldn't, was(n't)/were(n't) able to*, but not *could*:

The police were able to find out that he could speak French and Italian. (not The police could find out)

He couldn't remember who he was.

We sometimes use *manage to* to show that something is difficult to achieve:

I've finally managed to give up smoking after all these years!

We use *be able to* or *manage to* with perfect or future forms:

Apparently he's been able to find his family.

Within a year he'll probably be able to remember quite a lot. (not Within a year he can probably remember quite a lot.)

2 Other uses of *can*

We use *can* to mean *sometimes*:

People can do funny things when they've experienced something terrible. (= people sometimes do funny things)

We also use *can* to ask for and give permission:

Can I borrow the car this afternoon?

You can borrow it, but I need it later this evening.

3 Possibility

We use *must*, *may*, *might*, *could*, *couldn't* and *can't* when there is some evidence, information or belief that something is probably or possibly true (or not true). The modal verb we choose depends on the strength of the evidence we have to support our ideas.

very likely	<i>must</i>
possible	<i>might</i> , <i>may</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>may not</i> , <i>might not</i>
very unlikely	<i>can't</i> , <i>couldn't</i>

Could, *may* and *might* express the same degree of possibility:

He may/might/could remember some things already.

Couldn't expresses the same probability as *can't*. It is usually used to talk about the past:

The police realised he couldn't be Canadian. (= it was very unlikely that he was Canadian)

▲ *May not* and *might not* do not express the same probability as *couldn't*:

The supermarket may/might not be open today because it's a Bank Holiday. (*not the supermarket couldn't be open*)

Present

We use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, *could(n't)*, *must*, *can't + infinitive* without *to* to talk about possibility in the present:

He may remember some things already. (= it is possible he remembers some things now)

It can't be very easy living with someone who doesn't remember any of the past. (= it is very unlikely that it is easy)

We use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, *could(n't)*, *must*, *can't + be + -ing* to talk about things (possibly) happening or in progress at the time of speaking:

They must be having a difficult time adjusting to it all.

The phone is engaged. She might be talking to her sister on the phone.

Past

We can use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, *could(n't)*, *must*, *can't + have + past participle* to talk about possibility in the past:

In the attack he must have hit his head. (= there is strong evidence that he hit his head)

He could have had a wife and children. (this is a possible situation)

He can't have been married. (= there is strong evidence that he wasn't married)

We can use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, *could(n't)*, *must*, *can't + have been + -ing* to talk about things possibly happening or in progress in the past:

He might have been trying to run away from his past.

Future

We can use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, and *could (not)* + infinitive without *to* to talk about possibility or uncertainty in the future:

He could make a total recovery one day.

We can use *may (not)*, *might (not)*, *could (not)*, *must*, *can't + be* + -ing to talk about things possibly happening at a time in the future:

I might be meeting John later.

4 Expressing possibility and opinions in written texts

Modals are very important in written texts because they 'soften' the message and help to show that the author is expressing an opinion rather than a proven fact. *May* is very common in these kinds of texts as well as *can* used to mean 'sometimes'. (see B3)

Compare these sentences and the teacher's comments:

Student's work	Teacher's comment
People are unkind about their colleagues but it <u>is simply</u> because they are feeling insecure at work.	How do you know this?
People <u>can be</u> unkind about their colleagues but it <u>may</u> simply be because they are feeling insecure at work.	Good sentence.
Banning cars with high fuel consumption <u>is a good idea</u> , as it <u>will result</u> in less pollution.	This is a very strong opinion.
Banning cars with high fuel consumption <u>may be</u> a good idea, as it <u>could result</u> in a less pollution.	Good sentence. You are making your opinion 'softer'.

5 Alternatives to modals

Adverbs like *certainly*, *probably*, *possibly*, *perhaps* and *maybe* can be used to express similar ideas to modal verbs:

He had probably been attacked and robbed. (= he must have been attacked)

We can use *it + be + certain/likely/probable/possible/impossible* to express ability, probability and possibility:

It is possible to program your computer to translate texts automatically. (= you can program your computer)

It is possible that the train will be late. (= the train might be late)

B Grammar

We use expressions of obligation and necessity when there is a need to do something. This need can be internal (the speaker feels it is necessary) or external (rules or the situation make it necessary).

1 Obligation and necessity

The verbs *must* (*mustn't*), *have to*, *have got to*, and *need to* express obligation and necessity:

You'll need to allow a bit of extra time to get over jet lag.

You have to get a work permit before you go.

You mustn't dress too casually for work.

Must is a modal verb and its form doesn't change:

He must try a bit harder. (not he musts)

We use *must* when the obligation comes from the speaker:

You must invite me to visit you. (the speaker wants this)

When there is an institutional rule or a law *have to* or *need to* are more common than *must*:

You have to get a work permit before you go. (this is a rule)

Have to is more common in spoken English than *must*, but in written English either is used.

Have got to is more common in spoken English than written English:

I've got to find somewhere to live quite quickly.

Must is usually used on signs, notices and printed information:

All employees must hold a valid work permit.

To talk about obligation and necessity in the present we can use *must(n't)*, *have to*, *have got to* or *need to*. We use *have to* or *need to* with past and future tenses:

You will have to learn some Cantonese. (not You will must learn)

He had to get up really early to catch the ferry to work. (not He must got up early)

⚠ We do not usually make questions with *must* and *ought to*:

What sort of things do you need to know? (not What sort of things must you / ought you to know?)

2 No obligation

We use *not have to*, *not need to* and *needn't* to suggest that there is no obligation or necessity to do something:

You needn't buy lots of guide books before you go. (= it is not necessary to buy guide books before you go)

⚠ *Mustn't* does not mean the same as *don't have to*, *don't need to* and *needn't*:

You don't have to wait for ages. (= it is not necessary to wait)

You mustn't wait here. (= it is not allowed to wait here)

To talk about lack of obligation in the past we can use *needn't have* + past participle, *didn't need to* or *didn't have to*:

We didn't have to worry about work permits when I was there.

I needn't have bothered to get a work permit. (= it wasn't necessary)

There is a difference between *didn't need to* and *needn't have*:

John picked me up from the station so I didn't need to get a taxi home. (= it wasn't necessary so I didn't get a taxi)

I needn't have got a taxi because John's flat wasn't far from the station. (= I got a taxi but it wasn't necessary)

To talk about the future we use *not have to* or *not need to*:

I hope I won't have to work late tonight.

He's not going to need to come to the meeting after all.

3 Suggestions and advice

We can use modal verbs *should(n't)* and *ought (not) to* to make suggestions or give advice:

You should try and use it whenever you can. (= I think it is a good idea)

You ought to take lots of passport photos with you.

You shouldn't dress casually for work.

We can use *must* to give strong advice:

You must phone me when you get there.

4 Adverbs

Adverbs like *also*, *always*, *never*, *sometimes*, *just* and *only* come after modal verbs:

You should always carry plenty of loose change.

You must never do that again.

To add extra emphasis we can use *really* before the verb:

You really have to see it to believe it.

5 Formal written English

Verbs of obligation, necessity and suggestion are common in formal and academic writing when giving opinions:

Governments should take advice from the experts before making new laws.

Companies need to consider cultural differences when engaging in business with overseas organisations.