

# Modals and Modality

## Definition:

Modality is about a speaker's or a writer's attitude towards the world. A speaker or writer can express certainty, possibility, willingness, obligation, necessity and ability by using modal words and expressions.

Speakers often have different opinions about the same thing.

These speakers are looking at the same thing.

## Modal verbs

Here are the main verbs we use to express modal meanings:

Core modal verbs: can, could, may, might, will, shall, would, should, must

Semi-modals: dare, need, ought to, used to

Other verbs with modal meanings:

Be able to

- Be going to: form
- Can
- Could
- Dare
- Have got to and have to
- May
- Might
- Must
- Need
- Ought to

- Shall
- Should
- Used to
- Will
- Would

## Modal words and expressions

There are a number of other words and expressions in English, apart from the main modal verbs, which also express modal meanings.

Here are some examples:

modal form	Example
<b>Noun</b>	There is a <b>possibility</b> of snow this evening.
<b>adjective</b>	It's <b>clear</b> that the Prime Minister is worried about education.
<b>adverb</b>	I'm <b>certainly</b> not fed up with it.

## Be about to

Be about to is used to talk about things which are going to happen very soon:

**I'm about to** eat. Can I phone you back?

It is often used with just:

**We're just about to** set off for a walk. Do you want to come?

When used in the past, be about to can refer to things that were going to happen but didn't:

I **was about to** complain but he came over and apologised.

We don't use be about to with time expressions:

I **was about to** call you.

Not: ~~I was about to call you in ten minutes.~~

## **Be able to**

### **Abilities**

Be able to is like can. We use it to talk about abilities. We often use it in places where it is not possible to use can. For example, it isn't possible to use can after another modal verb:

She **won't be able to** concentrate.

Not: ~~She won't can concentrate.~~

He **should be able to** work in a team.

Not: ~~He should can work in a team.~~

Be able to is a more formal alternative to can:

I am very sorry but I **am not able to** give you that information. (or, less formal: I cannot give you that information.)

### **Past achievement: could or was/were able to?**

We usually use was/were able to, not could to talk about past achievements in affirmative clauses. This is because they are facts, rather than possibilities:

Only one person **was able to** beat the record.

Not: ~~Only one person could beat the record.~~

We use couldn't or, more formally, wasn't/weren't able to in negative clauses:

We **weren't able to** finish the marathon in under four hours. (or We **couldn't** finish the marathon ...)

## Be due to

Be due to is used to talk about things that are expected or planned to happen at a certain time. We often use it with a time expression:

**Are you due to** hand in homework today?

The train is **due to** arrive at Glasgow Central at 12:12.

## Be likely to

Be likely to is used to talk about how probable things are:

**Are** parents who have a lot of money **likely to** spoil their children?

It is often used to make comparisons with words like more and less:

I think men **are more likely to** spend a lot of money on food than women are.

**A:**

I liked Budapest as well.

**B:**

Yeah. I'm probably **less likely to** go back there than to Prague.

We also use it's likely followed by that + clause:

**It's likely that** sales will rise.

We form the negative of be likely to and be likely that either with not or with unlikely. Unlikely is more formal:

The company is **not likely to** make a profit in the second half of the year.  
People are **unlikely to** listen to him now because they know he lied.

### **Be meant to**

Be meant to is used to talk about what is desirable, expected or intended:

**A:**

It looks green to me.

**B:**

Oh, **is it meant to** be a different colour?

It **was meant to** be like a quiz and we were all in different teams and there **was meant to** be a fantastic prize.

### **Be supposed to**

Be supposed to is used to talk about obligations and arrangements:

Where were you? You **were supposed to be** at the party!

You're **supposed to have** an hour for lunch. That's the law.

It's also used to talk about people's expectations or beliefs about something:

[talking about some medicine]

**A:**

Take some of this.

**B:**

What's it **supposed to** do? (What does it do to you?)

And then I'm gonna get a train over to Brussels which takes all day as well. It's **supposed to** be a nice route with forests and mountains and

things. (gonna represents 'going to', as it is pronounced in informal speaking.)

A reader asked for some guidance on using the modal verbs "may," "might," "can," "could," and "ought." Editor Emily Brewster responds: The entries for each of these include the complete definitions, as well as many example sentences, so I will discuss here only the aspects of each that I think are likely to cause confusion.

These verbs are all modal verbs, which means that they are generally used in combination with other verbs, and are used to change the verb's meaning to something different from simple fact. Modals express possibility, ability, prediction, permission, and necessity.

"Ought" is probably the simplest of this set of modal verbs. It's almost always followed by "to" and the infinitive form of a verb. It means the same thing as "should," and is used in the same ways, although "ought" is less common and a bit more formal. A few examples of "**ought**" are "We ought to be home by noon," which means "I expect that we will be home by noon," and "I ought to fix that," which means "I should fix that."

"**May**," "**might**," and "**could**" can all be used to say that something is possible, as in "The story may/might/could be true" or "The painting may/might/could be very old." You can use any of the three in contexts like these.

"**May**" and "**might**" can both be used to say that one thing is true but that something else is also true, as in "This car may/might be more expensive than the other cars, but it will be cheaper to maintain." (If we used "could" instead of "may" or "**might**" here the sentence would mean that it is not certain that the car is more expensive than the other cars.) Both "**may**" and "**can**" are used to indicate that something is allowed, but "may" is more formal: "You may leave whenever you like" is more formal than "You can go whenever you want to." Children are often taught that

only "may" is used for permission, and that "can" is used only for ability. (For example, a child may ask a question like "Can I go outside?" and the responding adult might correct the child by saying that the child is able to go outside, but must ask permission by using "**may.**") "**Can,**" however, is often used for permission.

"**Can,**" "**may,**" and "could" are all used to make requests. "**May**" is formal in these contexts, while "**can**" and "**could**" appear mainly in speech: "**May** I have your attention?" is more formal than "Can I have your attention?" or "Could I have your attention?"

Making matters even more confusing, I think, is that two of the modal verbs we're discussing are, aside from being modal verbs in their own rights, the past tense forms of two of the others: "**might**" can be used as the past tense of "may," and "could" is the past tense of "can." "**Might**" functions as the past tense of "may" mostly in formal contexts, as in "Generously, the senator inquired as to whether she might be of any help to us." "(The usual way of expressing past tense with "**May**" is "may" followed by "have" and a past participle. The sentence "It may take longer than they expect it to," becomes "It may have taken longer than they expected it to.") "**Could**" is the usual past tense of "**can**": "We could see the ocean from the window of the cabin." (see also the usage note at "can")

For further guidance on these verbs, check the entries for each.