

Modal Verbs: Everything You Need To Know!

In this lesson, we'll explore 9 of the most useful modal verbs in English: **can**, **could**, **may**, **might**, **must**, **should**, **shall**, **will** and **would**. You'll discover how we use these modal verbs naturally in everyday conversations to express things such as ability, permission, possibility and obligation. By the end of the lesson, you'll be ready to use these modal verbs confidently in your own speech and writing.

Form

Let's get started with these modal verbs by talking about form. I've got some great news! The modals we're covering today have **one form** — **the base form you see in the dictionary**.

- We don't add -ing, so it's always **could**, never '~~coulding~~'.
- We don't add -ed, so it's always **must**, never '~~musted~~'.
- We don't add -s in the third-person singular, so it's always **should**, never '~~shoulds~~'.

Modals are **followed by another verb** — not a modal — in the **base form**. They're not followed by a to-infinitive.

- I **might** **bake** a cake later.

Modals will sometimes appear alone when we don't want or need to repeat a previous verb.

- I'm going to jump the queue.
 - No! You **can't** [jump the queue].

Rules	
These modals are always used in the base form.	
Modals are followed by another verb	
They're not followed by a to-infinitive.	They sometimes appear alone when it's not necessary to repeat the verb.

● Questions

We form questions by **inverting the subject-modal verb word order**. We don't use 'do' or 'did'.

- **Can** I help you?
- **Should** I dye my hair green?

● Negatives

We form negatives by adding **not**.

- **could not**
- **should not**

Cannot is different, as it is one word in the negative.

We often use contractions - **can't**, **won't**, etc. But note that we don't usually contract **may not**. 'Mayn't' /'meɪənt/ does exist, but it's not common.

● Can

Let's start with **can**.

Use can/can't	
1. to talk about present ability	I can speak Spanish.
Used in this way, it's common to hear the weak form /kən/ with a schwa, not the strong form /kæn/ . We often use the weak form in statements and questions.	
2. to show no ability	I can't speak Japanese.
Notice the pronunciation difference between can /kæn/ with a short 'a', which is the pronunciation we use in short answers and can't /kɑ:nt/ with the long ahh sound.	

3. to ask for and give permission	Can I have pizza for breakfast?
4. to refuse permission	No, you can't .
5. to make requests.	Can you make me a pizza?
6. to talk about general possibilities	It can be cold and rainy in the UK in March. (It's not always cold and rainy, but it is sometimes.)
7. to make deductions when we're sure something is not true or not happening	Ellen can't be Tim's sister. He doesn't have a sister.

● Could

Now, let's continue that thought with a different modal verb.

- Ellen **could** be Tim's cousin. He has about 10!

Am I sure? No, but it's a decent guess based on some evidence I have, which is why we use **could**.

When making past deductions, **could not have + past participle** has the same meaning as **can't have + past participle** - we don't think it's possible that something happened.

- You **couldn't/can't have seen** Lucy in London yesterday. She was in Hawaii.

Use could/couldn't

1. to make deductions when we think something is possible but we're not certain.	Ellen could be Tim's cousin. He has about 10!
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Could expresses general ability in the past. You can use **was/were able to** or **managed to** to talk about something that was possible on a specific occasion in the past.

General ability:

- When she was a kid, my sister **could** do jigsaws faster than anyone else in the family.

Specific occasion:

- One Christmas, she **was able to** finish a 1,000-piece puzzle in just two days.
- Did you **manage to** find a gift for your dad's birthday? (not **could**)

Now, back to **could**!

Use could/couldn't	
2. to make requests (it's more formal and more polite than 'can')	Excuse me, could you help me look for my glasses? I can't see a thing without them!
3. to talk about things that are possible in the present or future	My glasses could be in my bag. It's like a black hole in there!

● Might

Another modal verb with similar functions? **Might**!

Use might/might not/mightn't	
1. to make requests (in formal language)	Might I borrow your umbrella for a moment?
*This isn't common in everyday speech. Can or could are used much more often.	

2. to make deductions when we're not sure (for the past, use structure modal + have + past participle)	A: Where's the fish we're having for dinner? B: Not sure. The cat might've eaten it.
*We can use all of our modals of deduction to talk about the past as well as the present and future.	
3. to talk about things that are possible in the present or future using might + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I might not go to Spain this summer. I might head to Italy to practise my Italian instead.

● May

OK, are there any other ways to talk about possibility? Yes! **May**.

Use may/may not

1. to talk about possibility (more formal)	We may have to reschedule the meeting if the boss doesn't arrive soon.
*Fluent speakers disagree on which verb - could , might or may - expresses more or less certainty. Many people think might expresses the least certainty.	
2. to ask for permission (in formal language)	May I use the conference room to make a personal call?
3. to give and refuse permission (in formal language)	Yes, you may . No, you may not .
4. to make deductions about things we think are probably true, but we're not sure (we tend to use might more often in speech)	A: Oh dear, the boss looks annoyed. She may not be happy that we cancelled the meeting. B: Or she may just be annoyed that we ate all the doughnuts. Who knows?

● Must

Alright, but what if we're sure something is true?

Use must/must not/mustn't

1. to make deductions when we are certain about something

The boss **must** be annoyed that we cancelled the meeting because she came all the way from Berlin.

*Remember, when making deductions, the opposite of **must** is **can't**, not 'must not'. When we're unsure, we use **may**, **might** and **could**.

2. to talk about obligations, often things we think are important for us to do (internal obligations)

I **must** call my dad later. It's his birthday.

We often use **have to** and **need to** talk about obligations.

- I **have to** learn Korean if I want to get promoted.
- I really **need to** stop procrastinating.

To express no obligation, we use **don't have to** or **don't need to**.

- We have to wear a suit to work most days, but on Fridays, we **don't have to**. We can wear jeans if we want.

4. to talk about rules and laws

At the cinema:
You **must** put your phone on silent mode while the film is playing.
You **mustn't** talk loudly during the film.

5. to make strong suggestions

You **must** try the cheddar jalapeño popcorn — it's delicious!

*We stress the modal verb with this meaning - 'You **must** try it', but we don't normally stress modals in the present.

● Should

We've got 4 more modal verbs to go. Now, we're looking at **should**, and it's used similarly to **must** in some ways, though it's less strong.

Use should/should not/shouldn't

1. to talk about obligations	You should always wear your seatbelt on the plane.
2. to talk the right or wrong thing to do	We shouldn't call Sarah now. It's after midnight.
3. to make suggestions and give and ask for advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You look exhausted. You should take a nap. Should we get a taxi to the airport?
4. to express expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The flight should be on time. Shouldn't Alice be here by now? She said she'd be arriving an hour ago.

● Shall

Use shall

1. to make suggestions	Shall we go to the beach today?
2. to ask for advice	What shall we do with all the sandwiches we didn't eat?
3. to make offers	Shall I help you with them?

***Shall** is usually used with 'I' and 'we' and is fairly common in British English, but it's not that common in North American English where 'should' or another verb is preferred.

We can use **shall** to talk about or predict the future, though this is fairly old-fashioned and not commonly used. Here's an example:

- We **shall** be in London this time tomorrow.

● Will

Let's look at our next verb: **will**.

Use will/will not/won't

1. to make offers	I'll drive tomorrow so you can enjoy the views.
*We almost always contract will to 'll, and will not to won't in spoken English.	
2. to make promises	I won't be late to pick you up, I promise.
3. to make statements and predictions about the future	The hike'll be stunning in this gorgeous sunshine.
4. to make requests	Will you pack us some snacks, please?

● Would

Let's talk about our final modal verb: **would**.

Use would/would not/wouldn't

1. to make requests (more polite than 'will')	Would you pass me the map?
2. to give advice	If I were you, I'd turn the map around. You've got it the wrong way up.

We often contract **would** to **'d** in speech and informal writing.

3. to talk about hypothetical situations in the present, past, or future

So, what **would** you do if I said we were lost?

4. to express the past form of 'will' in indirect speech

- We'**ll** find the path again. I promise.
- He promised that we **would** find the path again.

BONUS

If you'd like to practise what you've just learnt, click the link below for interactive activities designed to help you use these words naturally!

👉 [Click here to access the exercises!](#)



Exercises

Which function of modal verbs can you see in these sentences?

1. **Could** you please pass me the salt?

- a. polite request
- b. past ability
- c. possibility

2. You **must** be joking! That can't be true.

- a. obligation
- b. strong deduction
- c. permission

3. **Shall** we go for coffee after class?

- a. future prediction
- b. making a suggestion
- c. asking for advice

4. I **would** travel more if I had more vacation days.

- a. polite request
- b. hypothetical situation
- c. past ability

5. The meeting **may** take longer than expected.

- a. permission
- b. obligation
- c. possibility

Choose the correct modal verb to complete the sentences.

can	shall	must	might	could
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6. _____ you help me with this task? I don't understand what to do.

7. They _____ be late - there's heavy traffic on the highway.

8. _____ we have lunch together tomorrow?

9. When I was young, I _____ swim across the entire lake.

10. You _____ finish this report by 5pm - it's absolutely essential.

Answers:

1. a. 2. b. 3. b. 4. b. 5. c. 6. Can/Can't/Can/Could 9. could 10. must

