Helping Verb

Definition of Helping Verb

A helping verb is a verb that precedes the main verb in a [sentence](#). A helping verb is also called an "auxiliary verb," and words may or may not separate a helping verb from the main verb. The main purpose of a helping verb is to support the main verb by providing it with a clearer meaning. The most commonly used helping verbs include:

> is
> are
> am
> was
> were
> be
> been
> being
> have
> has
> had
> does
> do
> did
> shall
> will
> would
> should
> could
> can
> must
> might
> may

In the sentence, "They? Who would bother about them? I should not know who they were," (*A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen), the underlined words are helping verbs.

Types of Helping Verb

A helping verb can be classified as one of two kinds of helping verbs:

Primary Helping Verb

There are three specific primary helping verbs: "be," "have," and "do." These are called "primary" helping verbs because they either help the main verb, or function as one.

"Be"

This primary helping verb can be deceiving because it shows a state of existence, but not an action. Therefore, in expressive writing the use of "be" is discouraged. Instead, the action appears as a present or past participle:

> "He <u>is</u> watching a movie."
> "They <u>were</u> helping us move out."

Here, the underlined words function as both present and past forms, respectively, of the helping verb "be."

"Do"

The "do" verb can perform different functions:

> "<u>Do</u> you want tea?" (Question)
> "They <u>do not</u> like broccoli." (Negative connotation)
> "I <u>do</u> like to eat broccoli." (Emphasis)

"Have"

This verb puts a sentence into the perfect tense, which shows that an action has already been accomplished:

> "I <u>have done</u> my homework."

Modal Helping Verb

A modal helping verb helps modify the mood of the main verb, and can change the meaning of the sentence in which it is used. Modal helping

verbs express necessity or possibility, and they never change their form. Modal helping verbs include:

> can/could
> may/might
> will/would
> shall/should
> must

For example:

> "The train <u>may</u> arrive on time this morning."
> "<u>Would</u> James ride with Katy for tennis practice?"
> "You <u>can't</u> go to the party this evening."
> "You <u>must</u> be present for your final exam."

Examples of Helping Verbs in Literature

Example #1: *The Key* (by Isaac Bashevis Singer)

> "A pigeon landed nearby. It hopped on its little red feet and pecked into something that <u>might have</u> been a dirty piece of stale bread or dried mud."

These lines have made the use of linking verbs. The primary [linking verb](#) here is "have", which is expressing the ability to do something, and the modal helping verb is "might," which expresses possibility.

Example #2: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (by Harper Lee)

> "When he <u>was</u> nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When enough years <u>had</u> gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident ... Simon would <u>have</u> regarded with impotent ... "

These lines have used the primary helping verbs "was," "had," and "have." Here, "was" functions as the main verb, while "had" and "have" act as helping verbs to assist the main verbs "gone" and "regarded."

Example #3: *Heart of Darkness* (by Joseph Conrad)

"I <u>could</u> not leave him...He <u>had</u> his second illness then. Afterwards I <u>had</u> to keep out of the way; but I <u>didn't</u> mind. He <u>was</u> living for the most part in those villages on the lake. When he came down to the river, sometimes he <u>would</u> take to me, and sometimes it was better for me to be careful."

Conrad has used three primary helping verbs in this passage: "had," "was," and "did." He has also used two modal helping verbs: "could" and "would," which bring possibility to the ideas presented.

Example #4: *A Red Red Rose* (by Robert Burns)

"I <u>will</u> love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life <u>shall</u> run.

And fare thee weel, my only luve!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I <u>will</u> come again, my luve,
Though it were ten thousand mile."

In these lines, the speaker uses hyperbole to express his deep love for his beloved. He says his final farewell through the use of the modal helping verbs "shall" and "will," in order to promise her that he will return.

Function

The main function of a helping verb is to help the main verb give meaning to a sentence. Helping verbs may also function as main verbs. Helping verbs enable writers and speakers ask for, or grant, permission, as well as to express possibilities, necessities, directions, expectations, hope, and obligations.