**Modals – Reading Material**

**Overview:**

A: You should read more.

B: Why? Is it because you realized I had a problem with communication!

A:I may sound sarcastic but you must focus on the doing part. B: Really!

A: I know If it wasn’t' for me you would still do what it takes.

B: That's correct however I do appreciate your direction and I know I can do this.

In the above dialogue, every sentence expresses a mood, a condition. Either a possibility or an ability, a strong advice etc. So, the words that express these conditions are called Modal Verbs and they are: can, could, will, would, may, might, must, shall and should.

**Objectives:**

This reading material is designed to help you:

* Understand and learn modals and their most common meanings.
* Apply them effectively in situations.

**Modal Verbs**

There are nine modal verbs in English: can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would

We use modal verbs to show if we believe something is certain, probable or possible (or not). We also use modals to do things like talking about ability, asking permission making requests and offers, and so on.

Certain, probable, possible

**Possibility:**

We use the modals could, might and may to show that something is possible in the future, but not certain:

They might come later. (= Perhaps/Maybe they will come later.) They may come by car. (= Perhaps/Maybe they will come by car.)

If we don’t hurry we could be late. (= Perhaps/Maybe we will be late)

We use could have, might have and may have to show that something was possible now or at some time in the past:

It’s ten o’clock. They might have arrived now.

They could have arrived hours ago.

We use the modal can to make general statements about what is possible: It can be very cold in winter. (= It is sometimes very cold in winter)

You can easily lose your way in the dark. (= People often lose their way in the dark)

We use the modal could as the past tense of can:

It could be very cold in winter. (= Sometimes it was very cold in winter.)

You could lose your way in the dark. (= People often lost their way in the dark)

**Impossibility:**

We use the negative can’t or cannot to show that something is impossible: That can’t be true.

You cannot be serious.

We use couldn’t/could not to talk about the past:

We knew it could not be true.

He was obviously joking. He could not be serious.

**Probability:**

We use the modal must to show we are sure something to be true and we have reasons for our belief:

It’s getting dark. It must be quite late.

You haven’t eaten all day. You must be hungry.

We use must have for the past:

They hadn’t eaten all day. They must have been hungry.

You look happy. You must have heard the good news.

We use the modal should to suggest that something is true or will be true in the future, and to show you have reasons for your suggestion:

Ask Miranda. She should know.

It's nearly six o'clock. They should arrive soon.

We use should have to talk about the past:

It's nearly eleven o'clock. They should have arrived by now. Ability, permission, requests and advice

**Ability:**

We use can to talk about someone’s skill or general abilities:

She can speak several languages. He can swim like a fish.

They can’t dance very well.

We use can to talk about the ability to do something at a given time in the present or future: You can make a lot of money if you are lucky.

Help. I can’t breathe.

They can run but they can’t hide.

We use could to talk about past time: She could speak several languages. They couldn’t dance very well.

We use could have to say that someone had the ability/opportunity to do something, but did not do it:

She could have learned Swahili, but she didn’t have time.

I could have danced all night [but didn't].

**Permission:**

We use can to ask for permission to do something: Can I ask a question, please?

Can we go home now.

could is more formal and polite than can: Could I ask a question please?

Could we go home now?

May is another more formal and polite way of asking for permission: May I ask a question please?

May we go home now?

We use can to give permission: You can go home now if you like. You can borrow my pen if you like.

May is a more formal and polite way of giving permission: You may go home now, if you like.

We use can to say that someone has permission to do something: We can go out whenever we want.

Students can travel free.

May is a more formal and polite way of saying that someone has permission: Students may travel free.

**Instructions and requests:**

We use could you and would you as polite ways of telling or asking someone to do something:

Could you take a message please?

Would you carry this for me please? Could I have my bill please?

Can and will are less polite:

Can you take a message please? Will you carry this for me please?

**Suggestions and advice:**

We use should to make suggestions and give advice: You should send an email.

We should go by train.

We use could to make suggestions: We could meet at the weekend. You could eat out tonight.

We use conditionals to give advice: Dan will help you if you ask him.

Past tenses are more polite:

Dan would help you if you asked him.

**Offers and invitations:**

We use can I… and to make offers:

Can I help you?

Can I do that for you?

We can also use shall I …

Shall I help you with that?

Shall I call you on your mobile?

We sometime say I can ... or I could ... or I’ll (I will) ... to make an offer:

I can do that for you if you like.

I can give you a lift to the station.

I’ll do that for you if you like.

I’ll give you a lift to the station.

We use would you like (to) ... for invitations: Would you like to come round tomorrow? Would you like another drink?

We use you must or we must for a very polite invitation: You must come round and see us.

We must meet again soon.

**Obligation and necessity**

We use must to say that it is necessary to do something: You must stop at a red light.

Everyone must bring something to eat.

You can wear what you like, but you must look neat and tidy.

I’m sorry, but you mustn’t make a noise in here.

We use had to for this if we are talking about the past: Everyone had to bring something to eat.

We could wear what we liked, but we had to look neat and tidy.

Modals + have

We use a modal verb with have and the past participle:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subject | Modal | Have | Past Participle |  |
| They | Will | have | arrived | by now |
| You | Might | have | seen | the film |
| Jack and Jill | Would | have | been | Late |

We use a modal verb with have to refer back:

… from a point of time in the past:

We were very worried. Someone might have taken the car.

… from the present

It is nearly eight o’clock. They will have arrived by now.

…or from the future:

We won’t eat until they arrive. They might not have had supper.

or to refer to past time:

You should have helped her when she asked.

They might have got lost. Nobody knows where they are. Can, Could and could have

**Questions and negatives:**

We make questions by putting the subject after can/could:

Can I …? Can you …? Could I … Could you …? and so on.

The negative form is can’t in spoken English and cannot in written English.

We sometimes say cannot, but it is very emphatic.

The negative form of could is couldn’t in spoken English and could not in written English.

We sometimes say could not.

**We use can and can’t :**

To talk about ability:

Maria can speak four languages.

I can’t swim, but my sister can.

To say that something is possible or impossible:

Learning English can be difficult [= Learning English is sometimes difficult.] Children can be very naughty [= Children are sometimes very naughty.]

It’s still light. It can’t be bedtime.

For requests and refusals of requests: Can I go home now?

You can go whenever you like.

You can borrow the car today, but you can’t have it tomorrow.

To offer to help someone: Can I help you?

Can I carry that bag for you?

We use could and couldn’t as the past tense of can/can’t:

To talk about ability:

I could run very fast when I was younger.

She couldn’t get a job anywhere.

To say that something was possible or impossible:

Our teacher could be very strict when we were at school. [= Some teachers were very strict.] People could starve in those days. [= People sometimes starved.]

You couldn’t use computers in the nineteenth century.

To make a polite request: Could I go now please?

Could you lend me a dictionary please?

To make a polite offer: Could I give you a lift?

I could carry that for you.

We use could have:

To show that something is possible now or was possible at some time in the past:

It’s ten o’clock. They could have arrived now.

They could have arrived hours ago. May, might, may have and might have

**Questions and negatives:**

We make questions by putting the subject after may/might:

May I …? Could I … Might I …? Etc.

The negative forms are may not and might not..

We use may:

When we are not sure about something: Jack may be coming to see us tomorrow.

Oh dear! It’s half past ten. We may be late for the meeting. There may not be very many people there.

To make polite requests:

May I borrow the car tomorrow? May we come a bit later?

When we use may not for a refusal it is emphatic: You may not!

You may not borrow the car until you can be more careful with it.

We use might:

When we are not sure about something: I might see you tomorrow.

It looks nice, but it might be very expensive.

It’s quite bright. It might not rain today.

As the past tense of may for requests: He asked if he might borrow the car.

They wanted to know if they might come later.

For very polite requests: Might I ask you a question?

Might we just interrupt for a moment?

We use may have and might have to show that something has possibly happened now or happened at some time in the past:

It’s ten o’clock. They might have arrived now.\*= Perhaps they have arrived+

They may have arrived hours ago. [= Perhaps they arrived hours ago.]

Can or Could

**Possibility**

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Could I have my bill please?

Can is less polite:

Can you take a message please?

**Offers and invitations:**

We use can I … to make offers:

Can I help you?

Can I do that for you?

We sometimes say I can ... or I could ... to make an offer: I can do that for you if you like.

I can give you a lift to the station.

Will or Would

We use will:

to talk about the future – to say what we believe will happen to talk about what people want to do or are willing to do

to make promises and offers

Would is the past tense form of will. Because it is a past tense it is used:

to talk about the past.

to talk about hypotheses – things that are imagined rather than true. for politeness.

**Beliefs**

We use will

To say what we believe will happen in the future: We'll be late.

We will have to take the train.

We use would as the past tense of will:

to say what we believed would happen:

thought I would be late …… so I would have to take the train.

**Offers and promises**

We use I will or We will to make offers and promises:

I’ll give you a lift home after the party.

We will come and see you next week.

**Willingness**

To talk about what people want to do or are willing to do:

We’ll see you tomorrow.

Perhaps dad will lend me the car.

We use would as the past tense of will:

To talk about what people wanted to do or were willing to do:

We had a terrible night. The baby wouldn’t go to sleep. He kept waking up and crying. Dad wouldn’t lend me the car, so we had to take the train.

To talk about something that we did often in the past because we wanted to do it:

When they were children they used to spend their holidays at their grandmother’s at the

seaside. They would get up early every morning and they’d have a quick breakfast then they

would run across the road to the beach.

**Conditionals**

We use will in conditionals with if and unless to say what we think will happen in the future or present:

I’ll give her a call if I can find her number. You won’t get in unless you have a ticket.

We use would to talk about hypotheses, about something which is possible but not real: To talk about the result or effect of a possible situation:

It would be very expensive to stay in a hotel.

In conditionals with words like if and what if. In these sentences the main verb is usually in the past tense:

I would give her a call if I could find her number. If I had the money I'd buy a new car.

You would lose weight if you took more exercise.

If he got a new job he would probably make more money. What if he lost his job. What would happen then?

We use conditionals to give advice: Dan will help you if you ask him.

Past tenses are more polite:

Dan would help you if you asked him.

**Phrases with would:**

Would you…, would you mind (not) -ing, for requests: Would you carry this for me please?

Would you mind carrying this?

Would you mind not telling him that?

Would you like ...; would you like to ..., for offers and invitations: Would you like to come round tomorrow?

Would you like another drink?

I would like …; I’d like … (you)(to) ..., to say what we want or what we want to do:

I’d like that one please. I’d like to go home now.

I’d rather… (I would rather) to say what we prefer: I’d rather have that one.

I’d rather go home now.

I would think, I would imagine, I'd guess, to give an opinion when we are not sure or when we want to be polite:

It’s very difficult I would imagine.

I would think that’s the right answer.

Will have or would have

We use the perfective ***will have*** when we are looking back from a point in time when something will have happened.

By the end of the decade scientists will have discovered a cure for influenza.

I will phone at six o’clock. He will have got home by then.

or looking "back" from the present:

Look at the time. The match will have started.

It’s half past five. Dad will have finished work.

We use would have as the past tense form of will have:

I phoned at six o’clock. I knew he would have got home by then.

It was half past five. Dad would have finished work.

We use would have in past conditionals to talk about something that did not happen: If it had been a little warmer we would have gone for a swim.

He would have been very angry if he had seen you.

Note: Modal verbs have only one form. You don't add \*'ing'\*, \*'ed'\*, or \*'es'\* to them