

Modal verbs

Ability

can • could • be able to

- ▶ **Can** he swim?
- ▶ My brother **could** swim when he was two.
- ▶ I **couldn't** find my keys this morning.
- ▶ I **could have** run faster, but I didn't want the others to get tired.
- ▶ She **has not been able to** walk since the accident.
- ▶ He **was able to** speak to Ann before she left.
- ▶ Will people **be able to** live on the moon one day, do you think?

Possibility

could • may • might • can

- ▶ **Could/Might** you have lost it on the way home?
- ▶ She **may/might/could** be ill. I'll phone her.
- ▶ I **may have/might have** left my purse in the shop.
- ▶ Amy **might/may** know the answer.
- ▶ I **might/may** not go if I'm tired.
- ▶ He **might have** enjoyed the party if he'd gone.
- ▶ It **can** get very cold in here at night.

Permission

can • could • may

- ▶ **Can** we come in?
- ▶ **Could** we possibly stay at your flat?
- ▶ Staff **may** take their break between 12 and 2. (written)
- ▶ **May** I sit here? (formal)

Prohibition

must not • may not • cannot

- ▶ You **mustn't** tell her anything.
- ▶ You **can't** get up until you're better.
- ▶ Crockery **may not** be taken out of the canteen. (written)
- ▶ You **must not** begin until I tell you. (formal)

Obligation

have (got) to • must

- ▶ All visitors **must** report to reception on arrival. (written)
- ▶ I **must** get that report finished today.
- ▶ Do you **have to** write your name on the form?
- ▶ She **had to** throw the burnt cake away.
- ▶ You **will have to** wait, I'm afraid.

No necessity

don't have to • shouldn't have • didn't need to • needn't have

- ▶ You **don't have to** pick us up – we can take a taxi.
- ▶ They **didn't have to** go through customs.
- ▶ You **shouldn't have** bothered making lunch – we could have bought a sandwich.
- ▶ He **didn't need to** have any fillings at the dentist's.
- ▶ They **needn't have** waited.

Advice and criticism

ought to • should

- ▶ **Ought we to/Should** we write and thank him?
- ▶ She **ought to/should** go out more often.
- ▶ You **ought to have/should have** gone to bed earlier.
- ▶ You **shouldn't** borrow the car without asking.
- ▶ I **ought to/should** go on a diet.
- ▶ I **ought to have/should have** asked her first.

Assumptions and deductions

will • should • must • can't

- ▶ That **will** be James – he's often early.
- ▶ The book **should** be interesting.
- ▶ There **must** be a leak.
- ▶ You **must have** dialled the wrong number.
- ▶ You **can't have** finished already!

Requests

can • could • will • would

- ▶ **Can** you pass me the dictionary?
- ▶ **Could** you help me with my translation?
- ▶ **Will** you buy me an ice cream, Mum?
- ▶ **Would** you type this letter for me, please?

NOTE **Could** and **would** are more formal than **can** and **will**.

Offers and suggestions

shall • will

- ▶ **Shall** I do the washing-up?
- ▶ **Shall** we go now?
- ▶ I'll take you to the airport.

→ For more information about modal verbs, look at the notes at the entries for CAN, MODAL, MUST, NEED and SHOULD.