

Modals*

Modals are verbs used with a main verb to express:

- degrees of certainty
- ability
- permission
- obligation
- opinion/advice
- willingness
- typical behaviour

Common modal verbs:

CAN / COULD

MAY / MIGHT

MUST

SHALL / SHOULD

OUGHT TO

WILL / WOULD

* Partially based on: Swan, M. & Walter, C. *How English Works*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Modal verbs behave differently from normal verbs

1. They do not take *-s* in the 3rd person

eg: *He can speak Chinese*

2. They use *not* for the negative form

eg: *You should not smoke so much!*

I can't speak Chinese

3. They do not use *-ing*, *-ed*, etc., and some of them cannot be used in the past tenses or the future tenses

eg: *I'm sorry I ~~cannot~~ meet you yesterday*

could

She ~~musted~~ study very hard

had to

Like auxiliary verbs, modals:

- are followed by the infinitive without *to*

eg: *You should see a doctor*

(exception: *You ought to see a doctor*)

- use inversion in questions

eg: *Could you speak louder, please?*

ABILITY - *can / could / be able to*

Can you swim? (present)

I couldn't meet you yesterday because I was ill (past)

You could speak better English if you studied more
(conditional)

Will you be able to help me tomorrow? (future)

PERMISSION - *can / may*

Can we smoke in here?

May I come in? (formal)

OBLIGATION, PROHIBITION, ADVICE

must / have to / should

Strong obligation

You must improve your work! (present)

We had to leave the country immediately (past)

Milder obligation / advice

You should see a doctor (present, future)

You should have said no (past)

Prohibition

You must not cross the road when the red light is showing

NECESSITY - *have to / must*

We have to get up early.

She had to work hard yesterday.

Do you have to go now?

Swimmers must take a shower before entering the pool.

NOTE: sometimes *must* is used when the speaker feels something is important

eg: *I must finish all my exams by the end of the summer*
(> because I want to)

Unlike *have to*, *must* has no infinitive, participles, or past tense.

When you leave school, you'll have to find a job.

I don't like having to cook every evening.

We've had to change our plans for the summer.

Joe had to go home yesterday.

Must or should?

1. You know, I think you _____ take a holiday.
2. I'm sorry, but you _____ go. We don't want you here.
3. You absolutely _____ check the tyres before you take the car today.
4. You _____ have your hair cut at least once a week
5. I think men _____ wear jackets and ties in restaurants.

MUST NOT vs. DON'T HAVE TO

I don't have to work on Saturdays.

(it's not necessary, but I could work if I wanted)

*Do not need to or
need not can also
be used (they are
more formal)*

I must not work on Saturdays.

(= it's prohibited)

Compare:

I must finish all my exams by the end of the summer

(either because I want to or because it's required)

I have to finish all my exams by the end of the summer

(because it's required)

Complete using *must not* or *do not have to*?

1. Campers _____ play music after 10 pm.
2. Students _____ ask for permission to stay out after midnight.
3. Residents _____ hang out washing out of the windows.
4. It's rained a lot, so we _____ water the garden.
5. British subjects _____ get visas to travel to Western Europe.
6. You _____ disturb your sister while she's working.

DEGREES OF CERTAINTY

Maximum certainty - *will / will not (> won't)*

I'm sure he will say no

I won't be here next week

Deduction - *must / can't*

- Tom is late. He must be stuck in the traffic

- No, he can't be. He said he would come by train

Uncertainty - *may / might*

Jack may get upset if you don't tell him the truth

I'm not sure, but I may/might be able to help you

Where is Susan? - She could be stuck in the traffic

May / Might

May suggests that something is possible.
Might suggests a weaker possibility.

She may be at home. (50% chance)

Ann might be there, too. (smaller chance)

According to the radio, it may rain today. It might even snow.

What's the difference?

The game may not finish before ten.

The game can't finish before ten.

Fill in the gaps!

1. Ted's flight from New York took more than 8 hours. He _____ be exhausted!

2. When you have a small child in the house, you _____ not leave small objects lying around. Such objects _____ be swallowed, causing injury or even death.

3. _____ you hold your breath for more than a minute?
- No, I can't.

4. The chemist's was open, so luckily I _____ buy some aspirin.

1. The computer isn't working. It _____ during production.

- a. can be damaged
- b. must have been damaged
- c. should have been damaged

2. Don't complain you got wet - you knew it was going to rain and you _____ your umbrella.

- a. must taken
- b. should have taken
- c. must have taken

3. Lisa isn't here yet. She _____ on her way.

- A. must be
- b. can be
- c. will be

Will: willingness and intentions

Will can express willingness and intentions. It can be used to announce a decision at the moment when it is made.

*I really will give up smoking tomorrow!
There's the doorbell, I'll go.*

Will you... can introduce instructions, orders or requests. *Would you...* is softer, more polite.

*Will you get me a paper while you're out?
Would you watch the children for a few minutes?*

Won't can be used to talk about refusals.

*He won't talk to anybody.
The car won't start.*

Will and *would*: typical behaviour

Will can be used to talk about habits and typical behaviour. *Would* is used to talk about past habits and typical behaviour.

She'll sit talking to herself for hours.

If something breaks down and you kick it, it will often start working again.

On Sundays, when I was a child, we would all get up early and go fishing.

Shall in questions

Shall I/we ...? can be used to ask for instructions and decisions, and to make offers and suggestions.

What shall we do?

Shall I carry your bag?

What time shall we come and see you?

Shall we go out for a meal?