

Modals and semi-modals

- The nine main modals (*will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should, must*) have only one form (ie they do not change tense or person) and are followed by a simple or continuous bare infinitive (eg *could + do, be doing, have done, have been doing*). They can also be followed by a bare infinitive in the passive (eg *could + be done, have been done*).
- Semi-modals have similar meanings to modals. They include: *need (to), ought to, had better* and *have (got) to*.
- Some semi-modals, such as *had better*, do not change tense or person. Others, such as *have (got) to*, do.
- Some semi-modals can be used in combination with modals, producing phrases such as *might have to*.

Ability

Real ability	Current or general ability	<i>can, can't</i>	You can't really speak seven languages fluently, can you?
	Past ability	<i>could, couldn't</i>	There's no way you could read when you were two!
	Decisions made now about future ability	<i>can, can't, could, couldn't</i>	I can get you a paper when I go to the shop, if you like.
	Future ability	<i>will/won't be able to</i>	One day, maybe, all adults will be able to read and write.
Hypothetical ability	Current or general hypothetical ability	<i>could, couldn't</i>	I couldn't go on a quiz show. I'd be too scared!
	Future hypothetical ability	<i>could, couldn't</i>	I could go with them to the cinema tomorrow but I won't because I've already seen the film.
	Past hypothetical ability	<i>could have, couldn't have</i>	They could have asked the Prime Minister much more searching questions. I wonder why they didn't.

Watch out!

- The full negative form of modals is written as two words, eg *could not*. The exception is *cannot*, which is one word.
 - *Can* and *could* cannot be used as infinitives. We can use *to be able to* instead.
✓ I'd love **to be able to** come with you to the cinema tomorrow but I just **can't**.
- We don't usually use *could* for past ability on one occasion. We use *was/were able to, managed* or *succeeded*, etc.
✓ Luckily, she **was able to** finish the article in time.
However, with verbs such as *see, hear, feel*, etc we can use *could* for past ability on one occasion.
✓ I **could see** that she was tired.

Permission

Asking for permission	<i>may, could, couldn't, can, can't</i>	Can I finish watching this before I go to bed?
Giving/refusing permission	<i>may, may not, could, couldn't, can, can't</i>	No, you can't .

Watch out!

- *May* is more polite and formal than *could*, and *could* is more polite and formal than *can*.
- We don't usually use modals to talk about past permission. We can use *was/were allowed to*.
✓ We **were allowed to** buy one comic each.
- However, we do use *could* to talk about past permission in reported speech. (see Unit 25 for more information)
✓ Mum said we **could** buy one comic each.

Advice

Asking for and giving advice	<i>should, shouldn't, ought to, oughtn't to, had better</i>	You should try to get that poem published.
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Watch out!

- We can only use *hadn't better* in questions.
✓ **Hadn't you better** check that these facts are actually true?
- We can also use *might/may as well* to give advice and make suggestions. This suggests that, although the suggestion is not perfect, there is no better option.
✓ We **may as well** watch this as there's nothing else on.

Criticism

Criticising past behaviour	<i>should have, shouldn't have, ought to have, oughtn't to have</i>	You shouldn't have spoken to Mrs Todd like that.
Expressing annoyance at past behaviour	<i>could have, might have</i>	You could/might have told me you were going to be late!
Criticising general behaviour	<i>will</i>	He will slam the door every time he goes out.
Criticising a specific example of someone's general behaviour	<i>would</i>	You would take the car just when I wanted to go out.

Watch out!

We can also use *might* as well to suggest criticism.
 ✓ I **might as well** be dead for all you care.

Obligation

Current or general obligation	<i>must, mustn't, have (got) to, need (to)</i>	You have to be a good communicator to be a press spokesperson.
A lack of current or general obligation	<i>don't have to, haven't got to, needn't, don't need (to)</i>	You don't always need to have a degree to become a journalist.
Future obligation	<i>will have to, must, mustn't, have (got) to, (will) need (to)</i>	You'll have to do quite a lot of research before you write this report.
A lack of future obligation	<i>don't/won't have to, haven't got to, needn't, don't/won't need (to)</i>	I'm glad we won't have to write any more essays on this course.
Past obligation	<i>had to, needed (to)</i>	We had to come up with three questions each.
A lack of past obligation	<i>didn't have to, didn't need (to), needn't have</i>	In the past, politicians didn't have to deal with being in a 24-hour media spotlight.

Watch out!

- We are more likely to use *must* for personal obligation (making our own decision about what we must do) and *have to* for external obligation (someone else making a decision about what we must do).
- Using *must* for questions is extremely formal. We usually use *have to*.
 ✓ **Do you have to** have a degree to be a journalist?
- *Mustn't* is used for prohibition. *Don't have to* is used for a lack of obligation.
- We can use *didn't have to* and *didn't need to* for things that we did or didn't actually do. However, we only use *needn't have done* for things that we actually did but weren't obliged to do.

Degrees of certainty

Certainty (or near certainty) about now, the future or generally	<i>will, would, must, can, can't, could, couldn't</i>	'There's someone at the door.' 'That'll be the postman.' 'It can't be . He's already been.'
Certainty (or near certainty) about the past	<i>will have, won't have, would have, wouldn't have, must have, can't have, couldn't have</i>	'They won't have heard the news, will they?' 'They must have heard by now, surely.'
Probability about now, the future or generally	<i>should, shouldn't, ought to, oughtn't to, may/might well (not), could well, might easily</i>	'The weather should be good tomorrow, shouldn't it?' 'Actually, the forecast said it may well rain .'
Probability about the past	<i>should have, shouldn't have, ought to have, oughtn't to have, may/might well (not) have, might easily (not) have</i>	'Jan should have finished writing her article by now, shouldn't she?' 'She may well have done , but I haven't seen it yet.'
Possibility about now, the future or generally	<i>could, may (not), might, mightn't, may/might/could just</i>	I might (just) have time to get to the library before it closes.
Possibility about the real past	<i>could have, may (not) have, might have, mightn't have</i>	Jim might not have checked his e-mail yet.

Watch out!

should and *should have* can be used in *that* clauses after words expressing importance and reactions.
 ✓ It's strange that you **should** say that. ✓ Was it necessary that Alan **should have been invited** to the meeting?