Modal Verbs

The modal verbs *are special group of auxiliary verbs used before other verbs. They affect the meaning of the main verb in different ways. Modals are used to make requests, suggest possibility, grant permission, make logical deductions, judgments, and assessments, indicate obligation, necessity, and ability, advice, and express speaker's attitudes.*

The pure modals:

Should, must, can, shall, could, would, may, might, will. *These modals are often referred to as "pure" modals because they consist only of one word and form; they don't change form or inflect for tense or person. They have only one form that does not change, although, for instance, "**can**" to the past form "**could**". However, this change in form is only when "**can**" is used in the sense of "ability".*

*Other constructions can function similarly as the modals, but are not considered "pure" modals. For example **ought to** is very similar in meaning to "**should**", but is not considered a "pure" modal because it consists of two words (ought + to); instead is referred to as "semi modal". In addition, for some of the modals there are related structures that convey similar meaning.*

Modals do not give us grammatical information. Instead, they convey semantic and pragmatic information:

1. *Could you pass me the salt, please?*
2. *Pass the salt please.*

Sentence 1 is more polite and less direct than sentence 2. The difference between the 2 sentences lies in the choice of the modal "could + you" versus the imperative or command form "pass". In the sentence1 the speaker conveys a different intended meaning by using "could you pass" rather than "pass". The difference in speaker intent is what we mean by **pragmatic information**.

Modals meanings:

1. Ability: can, could,

One of the first modals introduced to learners of English is "can" in the sense of expressing both present or future ability and its past tense counterpart "could". This is the only pure modal that inflects for tense when it is used to convey the meaning of ability.

"Be able to" is a related structure of the modal "can" in the sense of "ability". "Be able to" is not considered a modal because "be" inflects for person and tense.
We use **can (or sometimes am/ is/ are able to)** to describe natural or learned ability:

1) She can (is able to) run 1500 metres in 5 minutes.(natural ability)
2) He can't (is not able to) drive. (learned ability)

- We use **will be able** and not **can** to talk about skills that will be acquired in the future:
  I'**ll be able** to drive next summer so we can hire a car.
- '**can**' is used to refer to an ability to do sthg specific at a time in the future:
  I can come and see you next week.

Could versus was/ were able to:

We use could, couldn't or was/ were (not) able when we refer to a general ability in the past:

He could (was able to) run very fast when he was a boy. (general ability)

We use "**was/ were able to**" or "**managed to**" (not could) to describe the successful completion of a specific action (to talk about ability + achievement of the action):

We were able to (managed to) get tickets for the match yesterday. (not could)

However, we can use "couldn't" to describe a specific action not successfully completed:

We couldn't get tickets for the match yesterday. Or:

We weren't able to get tickets for the match yesterday.

We didn't manage to get tickets for the match yesterday.

We use '**be able to**' for different grammatical forms that are not possible with 'can':

To-infinitive: It's nice to be able to **go** to the opera.

After a modal verb: She **might** be able to help us.

Present perfect: It has been a quiet today. I have been able to get some work done.

Can/ could with verbs of perception:

We often use can+ verb in place of the simple present with verbs of perception (see, hear, smell, etc):

I can see a bird in that tree (see).

We often use could + verb in place of the simple past with verbs of perception:

I looked up, but I couldn't see anything. (I didn't see)

2. **Permission:** *There are four modals that are used in asking for permission:*

*can**   informal*
could
may   *I… … … ….?*
*might**   formal*
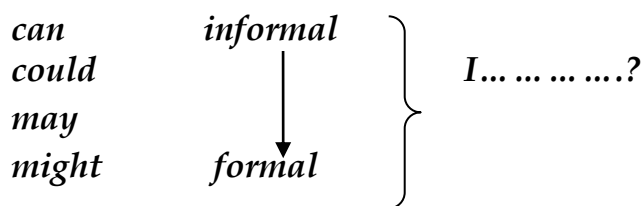
Can *I borrow your pen, please?*
*Do you think I **could** leave my bag here?*
May *I use your phone please?*
To give or refuse permission, we use:
*You **can/can't/ may/ may not/***
*You **may** borrow these books whenever you like.*
*You **can** stay here if you want.*
***'Might'** is very polite and formal; it is not common, and is mostly used in indirect question structures:*
*I wonder if I **might** have a little more cheese? (More natural than might I have)*

3. **Requests:** *to make a request, we use: **can, could, will, would you… ….?***

Could *you open the door for me, please?*
Would you *pass the salt please?*
Will you *(please) pass the salt?*

*The meaning of '**would you**' and '**will you**' in a polite request is the same. Would you is more common and is considered more polite.*
'Can you' usually sounds less polite than 'would you' and 'could you'.
Can you help me? Could you help me? Would you help me?
*In spoken English, **can** is more commonly used, especially between people who know each other. **Could and would** are considered identical in terms of politeness, but **can** is considered somewhat less polite.*

Polite requests with would you mind: we ask permission with:
Would you mind *if I closed the window?*
Would you mind *if I used the phone?*

In spoken English, the present simple is used: would you mind if I close the window?

Note: *the simple past does not refer to past time after would you mind; it refers to present or future time.*
We use 'would you mind + gerund' … …? *When we request a favor from someone*
Would you mind opening the window?
Would you mind moving- I can't see.
Can, could, would, may, might *all refer to present or future time when used to ask for permission or to make a polite request.*

4. *Offer: to make an offer, we use:*

Can / shall *I, we…..?*
Would you like***?*
I'll………, shall I? / May I…..? (more formal).
Can I help you?
Shall I carry that for you?
Would you like me to help you?
May I take your coat?
I'll make you some breakfast, shall I?

5. *Suggestion / invitation:*

To make a suggestion or an invitation, we use:
Shall we***? / We could…….?*** *Would you like to*********?**
Shall we *go for a meal tonight? Yes, that would be nice.*
We could *have a game of tennis this afternoon? Yes, Ok, why not.*
Would you like to *come tomorrow? Yes, I would.*

6. **Possibility/ certainty/: *may, might, could, can, must, should, and ought to***
Speakers use these modals to indicate their level of certainty about something. These modals meanings range from slight possibility (may, might, could) to a high degree of certainty (must).

Present time:

Brian is always in class, but he is not here today:

a) *He may be sick.*
b) *He might be sick.* } *50% sure*
c) *He could be sick.*
d) *He must be sick.*   *95% sure*

May, might, and could express a weak degree of certainty: the speaker in (a, b, and c) is saying: perhaps, maybe, possibly John is sick, I'm only making a guess. I can think of other possibilities.

'must' expresses a strong degree of certainty, about a present situation, but the degree of certainty is still less than 100%; in sentence (d) Brian is always in class, but he is not here today:

He must be sick.(usually he is in class every day, but when I saw him last night, he wasn't feeling good. So my best guess is that he is sick today. I can't think of another possibility.

The negative form of 'must' is 'cannot' not 'must not':

There is a doorbell. It must be Roger.

No, it can't be Roger. It's too early. (not must not be Roger)

- *To talk about possibility in the present, we use may, might, or could + simple infinitive (usually the verb to be) or continuous infinitive:*
    - *Where is Tony? I don't know. He **may be** outside.*
    - *I won't phone Jennifer now because she **might be having** a rest.*

- *To talk about possibility in the past, we use may, might, or could +perfect infinitive (simple or continuous):*
    - *Brian is always in class, but he didn't come yesterday:*
    - *He may have been sick.*
    - *He might have been sick.*
    - *He could have been sick.*
    - *He must have been sick.*
    - *It's 8.30 so she **may have left** by now.*
    - *Betty wasn't at the party last night. She **might have been feeling** too tired to come.*

- *We use may/ might + have +past participle to say that by some time in the future, it is possible that sthg will have happened:*
    - *By next Friday I may/ might have completed the report.*

- *We use might (not may) + infinitive to talk about what was typically the case in the past:*
    - *During the war, the police might arrest you for criticizing the king.*

- *We use might/ could (not may or can) + have + past participle to say that sthg was possible in the past, but we know that it did not in fact happen:*
  The plan might/ could have gone wrong, but in fact it was a great success.
- *We use **'can'** in affirmative sentences when we talk about a more general possibility of sthg happening rather than the possibility of sthg happening in a particular situation:*
  The temperature can sometimes reach 50 in July.
  It may/ might/ could rain later.
- *We don't use 'may' to ask questions about the possibility of sthg happening. Instead we use, for example, 'could (not) or the phrase 'be likely':*
  Are you likely to visit Spain this summer again?
  It is possible to use 'might' in this type of question, but it is rather formal:
  Might they be persuaded to change their minds?
- *We use 'should' and 'ought to' to say that something is probably true now or will be probably true in the future:*
  I enjoyed her first novel, so the new one should/ ought to be good.

7. *Deduction: will, must*

*The use of 'must' to indicate degree of probability is often discussed in terms of a **logical deduction** (The speaker is making an inference with a high degree of certainty about a situation or event); 'must' expresses a strong degree of certainty about a present situation:*

Brian is always in class, but he is not here today: He must be sick.

(usually he is in class every day, but when I saw him last night, he wasn't feeling good. So my best guess is that he is sick today. I can't think of another possibility.

So the speaker is saying: probably Brian is sick. I have evidence to make me believe that he is sick. That is my logical deduction.

He hasn't eaten for hours. He must be hungry.

We express deduction with must be/ can't be/ must have been/ can't/ couldn't have been.

- *The negative of must be (with the sense of deduction) is 'can't be', not 'mustn't be':*
  You have just eaten. You can't be hungry again.
- *We use 'will' to express logical deduction when we are certain:*
  Can you answer the phone? It will be Mum. (She always calls around this time).

- *Sometimes we use 'will' rather than 'must' when our deduction is based on our knowledge of typical or repeated behviour or performance. However; 'will' ad 'must are interchangeable.*
- *'Should' and 'ought to' also carry the meaning of expectation or a high degree of certainty, similar to 'must' in the sense of logical deduction. The degree of certainty is not, however; as strong as with 'must'.*
- *Must + perfect infinitive is not used to talk about past obligation, it is used to make deductions about the past: She must have left early.*

8. *Obligation and Necessity: must, have to, have got to, needn't*

Another use of 'must' in addition to that of a logical deduction, is to express necessity and obligation. When 'must' is used in this meaning, there are two related structures that convey this same meaning; 'have to' and 'have got to'.

'Must' expresses necessity in present and future; there is no past form of must in the sense of necessity. We use 'had to' when referring to past necessity.

'Mustn't': adding 'not' to 'must' does not convey lack of necessity or obligation. Must not is a logical deduction or high probability.

'Have to' and 'have got to' *are related structures used to convey the meaning of necessity. They are less formal than must; 'have got to' is used only in spoken English.*

Are 'have to' and 'must' interchangeable?

In general, 'must' is considered stronger than 'have to'.

We use 'have to' when referring to external obligation; it comes from the situation:

We have to get up early tomorrow to catch the plane. (The time of the plane is the reason for the obligation).

I have to stop smoking. ('Doctor's orders)

With must the obligation comes from the speaker or writer of the sentence. This may be an individual or some kind of authority:

I must stop smoking. (I want to)

'Have to' *and* **'have got to'** *are often interchangeable but there is sometimes a difference:*
- *'have to' can be used for habitual actions and single actions:*
  I have to get the bus into work today. (Single action)
  I have to get the bus into work every day. (Habitual action)
- *'have got to' can only be used for single actions:*
  I have got to get the bus into work today.
- *'**Need**' can be a modal only in the question or negative form:*
  *You **needn't** come if you don't want to. / **Need** I bring anything with me?*
- *We can also use '**need**' as an ordinary verb, followed by the **to** + infinitive:*

You don't need to come if you don't want to.

- *To express lack of necessity in the past, we use needn't + perfect infinitive or didn't need to/ didn't have to + infinitive. There is some difference between them:*
  I needn't have gone to the station so early. The train was nearly an hour late. (It was not necessary to go to the station early but I didn't realize that and so I did get there early.)
  We didn't need/ didn't have to get up early because we had no lectures. (It wasn't necessary and so we didn't do it.)

Prohibition:
*We use **must not** in prohibitions (negative orders):*
Passengers must not speak to the driver.

9. *Advice/ Recommendation/: should/ ought to/ had better*

- **a)** *You should study harder. / You ought to study harder.*
- **b)** *Drivers should obey the traffic law. / Drivers ought to obey the traffic law.*
  'Should' and 'ought to' they express advisability; the meaning ranges from a suggestion (this a good idea) to a statement about responsibility or duty (this is a very important thing to do).
  In (a): this a good idea; this is my advice
  In (b): this is an important responsibility.

- *'Ought to' is more common in British rather than American English, and more common in speaking rather than writing.*

- *We use 'should' not 'ought to' when we give advice with I.*
  I should leave early tomorrow, if I were you.

- *We prefer 'should' to say what an outside authority recommends:*
  The manual says that the computer should be disconnected from the mains before the cover is removed.

- *To criticize actions in the past, we use should or ought to + have+ past participle. Should/ ought to in the past means that the subject didn't do the right thing:*
  I should have stayed at home (I didn't stay at home and my behaviour was wrong).
  You shouldn't have said that. (You have said that and it was wrong).
  'Should + have + past participle' is used more commonly than 'ought to have+ past participle'.

- *'Had better' is a fixed form. In American English is considered somewhat stronger than should and ought to. It implies very strong advice, a warning, a*

threat, or the expectation that the action will occur. It is used for present and future time reference.
You are ill. You had better see a doctor.

10. Expectation: should/ ought to/ be supposed to

- *'Should' and 'ought to' carry the meaning of expectation or a high degree of certainty, similar to 'must' in the sense of logical deduction. The degree of certainty is not, however; as strong as with 'must':*
  It's late. She should be here by now.
- *We use should/ ought to + have + past participle to talk about an expectation that sthg happened, has happened, or will happen:*
  If the flight was on time, she should/ ought to have arrived in Jakarta early this morning.
- *'be supposed to' expresses the idea that someone expects sthg to happen:*
  The game is supposed to begin at 10:00.
- *'be supposed to' also expresses expectations about behaviour:*
  I'm supposed to go to the meeting. My boss told me that he wants me to attend.
- *'be supposed to' in the past (was/ were supposed to) expresses unfulfilled expectation:*
  Jack was supposed to call me last night. I wonder why he didn't. (the speaker expected Jack to call, but he didn't).