

Introduction to modals

Form

The modal verbs are:

| statement | negative | statement | negative |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| can | can't / cannot | could | couldn't / could not |
| may | may not | might | mightn't / might not |
| will | won't / will not | would | wouldn't / would not |
| shall | shan't / shall not | should | shouldn't / should not |
| must | mustn't / must not | | |

All modal verbs:

- have only one form
I/you/he/she/it/we/they **may** write an e-mail.
- are followed by the bare infinitive
You **should call** Stella.
- do not have an infinitive

Semi-modals

There are also some phrases that we use like modals:

- **ought to** (ought not to)
- **have to** (don't have to)
- **need to** (don't need to / needn't)

Like modals, **ought to** doesn't change.**Have to** and **need to** change for person and tense like normal verbs and have infinitives.

Watch out!

- We form questions with modal verbs like this:
✓ **Can you** understand what he's saying?
- We use modals with the passive voice like this:
✓ The address **should be written** clearly on the front of the envelope.

Ability

| Use | Modal | Example |
|--------------------------|-------|--|
| Ability now or generally | can | Can you use a fax machine? |
| Ability in the past | could | Tom could read when he was two years old. |

Watch out!

- We use **be able to** to form other tenses.
- ✓ It's useful **to be able to** order things by e-mail. (infinitive)
 - ✓ Soon, I'll **be able to** speak Italian quite well. (future)
 - ✓ **Have you been able to** speak English for a long time? (present perfect)

Permission

| Use | Modal | Example |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--|
| Asking for permission | can / could / may | Can / Could / May I use the phone? |
| Giving permission | can / may | You can / may send the fax when you like. |

Watch out!

May is more polite than **could** and **could** is more polite than **can**.

Advice

| Use | Modal | Example |
|------------------------------|----------|--|
| Asking for and giving advice | should | Liam ought to / should watch less TV. |
| | ought to | |

For general information about modals, see Unit 19.

Obligation

| Use | Modal | Example |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Present or future obligation | <i>must / mustn't have to need to</i> | All visitors must turn off their mobile phones. You have to/need to press 'send'. |
| No present or future obligation | <i>don't have to don't need to needn't</i> | You don't have to/don't need to/needn't pay to send an e-mail. |
| Past obligation | <i>had to</i> | Yesterday, Sam had to buy more stamps. |
| No past obligation | <i>didn't have to didn't need to</i> | I learnt a little Italian, but everyone spoke English, so I didn't have to/didn't need to use it. |

Helpful hints

In spoken English, *have to* is more common than *must*. *Must* is often used in written notices and instructions.

- ✓ 'We **have to** pay the phone bill today,' Rita said.
- ✓ Passengers **must** turn off all mobile phones.

Watch out!

Mustn't and *don't have to* do not mean the same.

- ✓ You **mustn't** do that! (= Don't do that!)
- ✓ You **don't have to** do that. (= You can do that if you want to, but it's not necessary.)

Probability and possibility

| Use | Modal | Example |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Present strong probability | <i>must can't couldn't</i> | The phone is ringing – it must be Simon. This letter can't/couldn't be from Japan because it's got a French stamp. |
| Present and future probability | <i>should ought to</i> | We ought to/should hear from Cheryl this weekend. |
| Present and future possibility | <i>could may might</i> | I'm not sure what language it is – it could/may/might be Polish. |

Helpful hints

We often use *must*, *can't* and *couldn't* for probability when we have some evidence for our opinion.

- ✓ I just rang Paul, but there's no answer. He **must** be out.

Watch out!

To talk about possibility and probability about the past, we use a modal and the perfect infinitive. See Unit 22.