

Modal Verbs

Modals are a type of auxiliary verb, or helping verb, that provide more information about another verb. In particular, modals are used to indicate ability, necessity, possibility, and permission. There are eight of modal verbs: *can*, *could*, *should*, *will*, *would*, *may*, *might*, and *must*.

Here is a list of modal verbs, with some of their most common meanings and examples:

Modal	Meaning	Example
can	<i>to express ability</i>	I <i>can</i> juggle.
could	<i>to express possibility</i>	We <i>could</i> give that a try.
should	<i>to give advice</i>	You <i>should</i> ask your professor.
would	<i>to request</i>	<i>Would</i> you read my manuscript?
would	<i>to offer</i>	<i>Would</i> you like fries with that?
would	<i>in conditional sentences</i>	I <i>would</i> wait, if I were you.
may	<i>to express possibility</i>	It <i>may</i> arrive tomorrow.
may	<i>to request permission</i>	<i>May</i> I start eating?
might	<i>to express possibility</i>	This <i>might</i> be the best book of the year.
must	<i>to express obligation</i>	You simply <i>must</i> join us.
must	<i>to express strong belief</i>	It <i>must</i> have been ten years ago.

Here are the modal verbs arranged by their functions and strength of meaning. As you'll see, the same word can have different levels of strength depending on its function:

<i>Possibility</i>	<i>Ability</i>	<i>Necessity</i>	<i>Permission</i>
must will/would should may can/could/might	can could	must should	may could can

Modal verbs do not change form. Unlike most verbs, modal verbs have neither infinitive forms nor participle forms; nor do they change according to subject-verb agreement. In fact, because modals don't change form, the verbs *must* and *can* need to be switched out for other verb phrases in order to express ability or obligation in tenses other than the present. Here are some examples of when a modal verb works, and when it doesn't:

Present I *must* finish this chapter.
Past simple I had to finish this chapter.

Present She *must* head home.
Present perfect She has had to head home.

Present You *must* clean the kitchen.
Future You will have to clean the kitchen.

Infinitive I don't want to have to tell you again.

Present I *can* speak Spanish.
Past simple I couldn't speak Spanish until I was 20 (or)
I wasn't able to speak Spanish until I was 20.

Present I *can* write.
Present perfect I haven't been able to write in weeks.

Present I *can* go fishing.
Future I think I will be able to go fishing.

Infinitive I would like to be able to make my flight on time.

Exercises

Circle the correct modal for each sentence.

It's important to [be able to] [should] [can] find a parking spot.

Jack [might not] [couldn't] [shouldn't] hear the piano line because the percussionists were playing so loudly.

[Shall] [Will] [Must] you leave already? The party's just gotten started!

You [don't have to] [can't] [will not] be tired after sleeping ten hours last night.

[May] [can] you chop the onions, please?

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

This handout was adapted from:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/modals/>

[www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/grammar/Modals NEW.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/grammar/Modals%20NEW.pdf)

<http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/modal.htm>