## What is a modal auxiliary verb?

A **modal auxiliary verb**, simply called a **modal verb** or **modal**, is used to change the meaning of the actions indicated by other verbs (commonly known as main verbs). It is used to express **modality**. Modality covers a wide range of meaning, but generally comprises two types of meaning: either the speaker's attitude toward the proposition being expressed (e.g his degree of certainty about whether the proposition is true or not) or the actor's relationship to the described situation (e.g. whether he is under some kind of obligation to act in a certain way).

Modal verbs are defined by their inability to conjugate for tense and the third person singular (i.e., they do not take an "***-s***" at the end when ***he***, ***she***, or ***it*** is the subject), and they cannot form infinitives, past participles, or present participles. All modal auxiliary verbs are followed by a main verb in its base form (the infinitive without ***to***); they can never be followed by other modal verbs, lone auxiliary verbs, or nouns.

As with the primary auxiliary verbs, modal verbs can be used with ***not*** to create negative sentences, and they can all invert with the subject to create interrogative sentences.

### The Modal Verbs

There are nine "true" modal verbs: *will, shall, would, should, can, could, may, might,* and *must*. The verbs *dare, need, used to,* and *ought to* can also be used in the same way as modal verbs, but they do not share all the same characteristics; for this reason, they are referred to as semi-modal auxiliary verbs.

Although historically, most of the modals can be paired into past and non-past forms (***can/could, may/might, will/would, shall/should***), the 'past tense' forms are only in some respects usefully classified as such from the point of view of meaning. The past forms tend to have implications of tentativeness or politeness.

# *Can/Could*

Three major functions:

## (A) ABILITY

As a modal auxiliary verb, ***can*** is most often used to express a person or thing's ability to do something. The modal verb **could** is also used as a past-tense version of *can*, indicating what someone or something was able to do in the past.

> ***Can*** you remember where they live? [4]
>
> Martha ***could*** speak three languages by the age of six. [5]
>
> They say Daniel ***can*** cook better than his wife. [6]

| In '**ability**' sense | Can/Could | ➢ be able to …<br>➢ be capable of …<br>➢ know how to … |
|---|---|---|

However, the same meaning can also be approximately captured by the ***be possible*** construction; ***e.g.:***

> ***I could*** swim all the way across the lake. [*able but not certain*]

implies:

> It [was / would ***be]*** possible for me to swim all the way across the lake.

For this reason, the 'ability' meaning of ***can/could*** can be considered a special case of the 'possibility' meaning, ***viz*** one in which the possibility of an action is due to some skill or capability on the part of the subject referent.

**(B) POSSIBILITY (**especially in questions and negatives)

| |
|---|
| ***Can*** is also used to describe the possibility that something can happen, and to issue request and offers. |
| ***Could*** is also used to express a slight or uncertain possibility, as well as for making a suggestion or offer. |
| ➢ Even expert drivers ***can*** make mistakes. [l]<br>➢ Her performance was the best that ***could*** be hoped for. [2]<br>➢ If it's raining tomorrow, the sports ***can*** take place indoors. [3] |
| In this sense, ***can*** is generally paraphrased by ***it is possible*** followed by an infinitive clause; for example, [l] may be paraphrased:<br><br>***It is possible for*** even expert drivers ***to*** make mistakes. [la]<br><br>Sometimes, ***can*** indicates a future possibility; thus, for [3] an appropriate paraphrase would be: ***It will be possible*** . . . |

(C) **PERMISSION**

| |
|---|
| ***can*** is also used to express or ask for permission to do something |
| ***could*** also be used instead of ***can*** as more polite way of making a request or asking for permission. |
| ➢ ***Can*** we borrow these books from the library? [7]<br>➢ In those days only men ***could*** vote in elections. [8] |
| It is possible to paraphrase ***can*** in the sense of permission by ***be allowed*** to:<br><br>***Are*** we ***allowed to*** borrow these books from the library? [7a]<br><br>**Note:** In this sense, ***can/could*** is less formal than ***may.*** |

Is this grammatically correct, "**Can I ask you a question**?"?

It is grammatically correct but meaningfully incorrect

It is patently obvious that by asking the question, "Can I ask you a question?" that you are able to (i.e., you can) ask a question. So you have just answered your own question, and therefore your asking it was superfluous.

**NOTE:**

**[c] Can** [=permission] used with a future time adverbial (e.g.: You can borrow my typewriter tomorrow); but can [= ability] normally is not:

*?You can pass your driving test next time you take it.*

For future ability, the construction to use is *will be able to*:

*You will be able to pass your driving test next time you take it.*

except that can may be used in clauses, such as if-clauses, in which the present tense is normally used for future reference:

***IF** you can pass your driving test next month, you will be able to visit us more often during the summer.*

# May/Might

Two major functions:

**(a) POSSIBILITY**

As a modal auxiliary verb, **may/might** is used in situations when something is possible but not certain.

We ***may*** never succeed. [It is possible that we'll never succeed] [l]

You ***may*** be right. [It is possible that you are right] [2]

There ***might*** be some complaints. [3]

As these examples suggest, the most common meaning of ***may*** [= possibility] is different from the possibility sense of ***can.*** To paraphrase ***may,*** we use ***it is possible*** followed by ***a*** that-clause, rather than an infinitive clause. ***May*** in this sense may also be paraphrased by ***It may be that.*** . . , or by the adverb ***perhaps or possibly.*** Thus [2] is equivalent to:

It may be that you are right. [2a]

Perhaps/possibly you are right. [2b]

**Might** [= possibility] can be used as a (somewhat more tentative) alternative to ***may*** [= possibility], as in [3], and indeed is often preferred to ***may.***

**(b) PERMISSION**

You ***may*** borrow my bicycle if you wish. [5]

Visitors ***may*** reclaim necessary travel expenses up to a limit off $50. [6]

***Might*** I ask whether you are using the type writer? [7]

As a permission auxiliary, ***may*** is more formal and less common than ***can,*** which (except in fixed phrases such as if ***I may)*** can be substituted for it. However, ***may*** is particularly associated with permission given by the speaker. That is, a difference is sometimes felt between ***You may leave when you Like*** [= 'I permit you . . .'] and ***You can leave when you like*** [= 'You are permitted . . .'], which can mean permission in a more general and impersonal sense.

Again, ***might*** is used as a somewhat more tentative, and therefore polite, variant of ***may*** [= permission], as in [7].

# Must

**(a) (LOGICAL) NECESSITY**

There ***must*** be some mistake. [1]

You ***must*** be feeling tired. [2]

The Smiths ***must*** have a lot of money. [3]

The 'logical necessity' meaning of ***must*** is parallel to the use of ***may*** in the sense of epistemic possibility; it may, indeed, be called 'epistemic necessity', since it implies that the speaker judges the proposition expressed by the clause to be necessarily true, or at least to have a high likelihood of being true. ***Must*** in this sense means that the speaker has drawn a conclusion from things already known or observed. For example, the speaker of [3] has observed **the Smiths** living in a large house, travelling in an expensive car, etc, and therefore draws the conclusion that they 'must' be rich. ***Must*** [= logical necessity] cannot normally be used in interrogative or negative clauses. The negative of ***can*** [= possibility] fills the gap, so that ***You must be joking*** ['It is necessarily the case that you are joking'] is synonymous with ***You can't be serious*** ['It is impossible that you are serious]. Similarly:

She ***must*** be asleep = She ***can't*** be awake.

In addition to epistemic necessity, there is a ROOT NECESSITY meaning of ***must*** in examples like:

To be healthy, a plant ***must*** receive a good supply of both sunshine and moisture. [4]

***Must*** here can be glossed 'It is essential for . . .' or 'It is necessary for . . .'. There is, however, no implication in [4] of human control, and this distinguishes the root necessity use of ***must*** from its other root sense of obligation, to which we now turn.

**(b) OBLIGATION *or* COMPULSION**

You ***must*** be back by ten o'clock. ['You are obliged to be back. . .'; 'I require you to be back. . .'] [5]

We ***must*** all share our skills and knowledge. ... [6]

Productivity ***must*** be improved, if the nation is to be prosperous. [7]

In these examples, there is the implication, to a greater or lesser extent, that the speaker is advocating a certain form of behaviour. Thus ***must,*** unlike ***have (got) to,*** typically suggests that the speaker is exercising his authority.

An apparent exception to this occurs where the subject is in the first person:

I ***must*** remember to write to my brother. [8]

I'm afraid I ***must*** go now: I promised to be home at ten. [9]

But this, we can say, is perfectly consistent with ***must*** [= obligation], because the meaning is one of self-admonishment, ***i.e*** the speaker in this case exercises authority over himself, appealing to his own sense of duty, expediency, etc.

**NOTE:**

[a] On the use of obligating ***must*** in negative and interrogative clauses.

[b] Occasionally, must [= logical necessity] does occur with negations:

His absence must not have been noticed.

This has the same meaning as His absence can't have been noticed.

[C] There is a similarly rare occurrence of must [= logical necessity] in questions:

Must there be some good reason for the delay?

This assumes a positive answer, and might be glossed: 'Does there have to be some good reason. . .?

[d] Must [= root necessity] has a sarcastic use in some utterances with a 2nd person subject:

> If you must smoke, at least you could use an ashtray.
> Why must you always be finding fault with that girl?

# Will/Would (’ll/’d)

**(a) PREDICTION**

Three related uses of *will/would* are:.

(a1) The common **FUTURE** predictive sense of ***will*** is illustrated in [l]. The corresponding 'prediction in the past' sense of ***would*** is illustrated by:

> You *will* feel better after this medicine. [l]
>
> I was told I *would* feel better after this medicine. [2]

(a2) The **PRESENT** predictive sense of ***will***, which is comparatively rare, is similar in meaning to ***must*** in the 'logical necessity' sense:

> She *will* have had her dinner by now. [3]
> That'*ll* be the postman. [on hearing the doorbell ring] [4]

This meaning can be roughly paraphrased: 'It is (very) likely that. . .'

(a3) The **HABITUAL** predictive meaning often occurs in conditional sentences:

> if litmus paper is dipped in acid, it *will* turn red.

or in timeless statements of 'predictability':

> Oil *will* float on water.

In addition, it occurs in descriptions of personal habits or characteristic behaviour:

> He'*ll* talk for hours, if you let him. [said of a chatterbox]
> She'*ll* sit on the floor quietly all day. She'*ll* just play with her toys, and you won't hear a murmur from her. [of a good baby]
> Every morning he would go for a long walk. [ie 'it was his custom to go . . .']

In past tense narratives, ***would*** in this sense is a popular means of describing habitual behaviour:

> In the spring the birds would return to their old haunts, and the wood would be filled with their music . . .

This use of ***would*** is rather more formal than the equivalent use of used to, and unlike used to, needs to be associated with a time indicator, such as in the spring in the above example.

**(b) VOLITION**

Again, three different sub-senses may be distinguished. The volitional range of will extends from the 'weak volition' of WILLINGNESS to the 'strong volition' of INSISTENCE. Between these two, there is the more usual volitional sense of INTENTION, which often combines with a sense of prediction:

**(bl) INTENTION**

> I*'ll* write as soon as I can.
> We *won't* stay longer than two hours.
> The manager said he *would* phone me after lunch.

**(b2) WILLINGNESS**

> *Will/ Would* you help me to address these letters?
> I*'ll* do it, if you like.

This meaning is common in requests and offers. On the greater politeness of would.

**(B3) INSISTENCE**

> If you *will* go out without your overcoat, what can you expect?
> She *would* keep interrupting me.

## Shall

Shall is in present-day English (especially in AmE) a rather rare auxiliary and only two uses, both with a 1st person subject, are generally current:

(a) **PREDICTION** (with 1st person subjects)

***Shall*** is a substitute for the future use of ***will*** in formal style:

According to the opinion polls, I [will / shall] win quite easily.

When [will / shall] we know the results of the election?

(b) **VOLITION** (with 1st person subjects)

In the intentional sense, ***shall*** is again a formal (and traditionally prescribed) alternative to ***will*** after ***I*** or ***we:***

We [*will / shall*] uphold the wishes of the people.

In questions containing ***shall I/we, shall*** consults the wishes of the addressee, and thus moves from a volitional towards an obligational meaning. It is suitable for making offers:

***Shall*** I/we deliver the goods to your home address? [=Do you want me/us to. . .?] [l]

and for making suggestions about shared activities:

What ***shall*** we do this evening? ***Shall*** we go to the theatre? [2]

It is only in such questions that ***shall*** cannot regularly be replaced by ***will.*** Note that [l] illustrates the exclusive use of ***we,*** while [2] illustrates the inclusive use, ***i.e.*** the use of ***we*** which includes reference to the addressee(s).

## The Past Tense Forms of the Modals: *could, might, would,* and *should*

The uses of the past tense modals ***could, might, would,*** and ***should*** have already been illustrated earlier, but there is a need to examine the ways in which their uses differ from the corresponding non-past modals ***can, may, will,*** and ***shall.*** Five particular uses of the past tense modals are noted.

**'Past time' in indirect speech**

The past tense modals ***could, might, would,*** and ***should*** are used quite regularly as past tense equivalents of ***can, may, will,*** and ***shall*** in indirect speech constructions:

You ***can/may*** do as you wish. [= permission]

≈She said we ***could/might*** do as we wished.

The king ***can*** do no wrong. [= ability]

≈It was seriously argued that the king ***could*** do no wrong.

It ***may*** rain later. [= possibility]

≈We were afraid that it ***might*** rain later.

What ***can*** be done? [= possibility]

≈Nobody knew what ***could*** be done.

The plan ***will*** succeed. [= prediction]

≈I felt sure that the plan ***would*** succeed.

***Will*** you help me? [= volition]

≈I wondered if he ***would*** help me.

***Shall*** I open the window? [in offers]

≈She asked me if she ***should*** open a window.

***Must,*** together with ***need*** (as auxiliary), ***ought to,*** and ***had better,*** has no present/past distinction. These verbs are therefore unchanged in indirect speech constructions, even where they refer to past time.

**NOTE:**

In free indirect speech, the reporting clause is absent, so that the modal verb may occur back shifted to the past tense even in main clauses:

*Could* he be imagining things? (said Ahmed to himself.)

**'Past time' in other constructions**

Outside indirect speech contexts, the behaviour of the past tense modal forms is less predictable. ***Could*** and ***would*** act as the 'past time' equivalents of ***can*** and ***will;*** but on the whole, ***might*** and ***should*** do not act as the 'past time' equivalents of ***may*** and ***shall***.

**(a) CAN ≈ *COULD***

There were no rules: ***we could*** do just what we wanted. [= permission]

In those days, a transatlantic voyage ***could*** be dangerous. [= possibility]

Few of the tourists ***could*** speak English. [= ability]

**(b) WILL ≈ *WOULD***

Later, he ***would*** learn his error. [= prediction**]**

The old lady ***would*** sit in front of the television continuously. [= habitual prediction]

We tried to borrow a boat, but no one ***would*** lend us one. [= willingness]

He ***'would*** leave the house in a muddle. [= insistence]

Outside indirect speech, however, ***would*** is not used in the sense of intention; hence a sentence such as ***He would meet me the next day*** is almost inevitably interpreted as free indirect speech.

**NOTE:**

[a] There is a rare and archaic use of ***might*** outside indirect speech in the sense *'was/were permitted to*':

We ***might*** leave the school only at weekends.

[b] Corresponding to ***must,*** which cannot normally be used in reference to past time outside indirect speech or indirect thought contexts, the past tense form ***had to*** can be used in main clauses. Compare:

I ***must*** confess her latest novels bore me. - I ***had to*** confess her latest novels bored me.

[c] In contrast to the past modals ***could [***= ability] and ***would*** [= willingness], the constructions

***Was/were able to*** and ***was/were permitted to*** emphasize not just the potentiality, but the

fulfillment of an action. For instance, ***We were able/permitted to leave the camp early*** typically conveys the additional message: '. . . and, moreover, we ***did*** leave the camp early'. Hence ***was able to,*** but not ***could,*** is acceptable in contexts implying fulfillment:

I ran after the bus, and ***was able*** to catch it. [l]

*I ran after the bus, and could catch it. [2]

In the negative, however, this contrast between potential and fulfilled action is neutralized. Hence the following are both acceptable, and mean the same:

I ran after the bus, but ***wasn't able*** to catch it.

I ran after the bus, but ***couldn't*** catch it.

[d] On the other hand, ***could*** and ***would*** may refer to habitual fulfillment:

1 ***could*** run after a bus and catch it twenty years ago, but 1 can't do that now.

**Hypothetical meaning**

The past tense modals can be used in the hypothetical (or unreal) sense of the past tense in both main and subordinate clauses. Compare:

If United ***can*** win this game, they ***may*** become league champions. [l]

If United ***could*** win this game, they ***might*** become league champions. [2]

Sentence [2], unlike [l], expresses an unreal condition; ***i.e*** it conveys the speaker's expectation that United ***will not*** win the game, and therefore will ***not*** become league champions. For past hypothetical meaning (which normally has a contrary-to-fact interpretation), we have to add the perfective aspect:

If United ***could have won*** that game, they ***might have become*** league champions. [3]

The usual implication of this is that United did ***not*** win the game.

All past tense modals can be used in this way, to express the hypothetical version of meanings such as ability, possibility, permission, prediction, and volition. With the epistemic possibility of ***might,*** however, it is the meaning of the following predication, rather than of the modal itself, that is interpreted hypothetically. This will be evident from the following paraphrases:

They ***might*** have become champions.
[= It is possible that they would have become champions.]

We ***could*** have borrowed the money.
[= It would have been possible for us to borrow the money. (usually with the implication'. . . but we didn't')]

On the hypothetical use of ***would*** here below. In some contexts, especially when referring to the future, the 'unreal' meaning of past modals becomes weakened to something like improbability:

Not even a professional ***could*** do better than that.

From such instances, it is easy to understand how the hypothetical use of past modals has become adapted to express tentativeness.

**NOTE:**
***Could/might*** (+ perfective) are used in complaints or rebukes:

You ***could/might*** try to be more civilized!

You ***could/might*** have warned me she was coming.

The meaning here is close to the same construction with ***should*** [= 'ought to']: ***e.g.: You should have warned us.*** . . ***Could*** and ***might*** are interchangeable in this type of utterance.

**Tentativeness or Politeness: *could, might,* and *would***

Closely related to the hypothetical use above are specialized uses of ***could, might,*** and ***would*** in which the past tense form simply adds a note of tentativeness or politeness:

**(a) TENTATIVE PERMISSION** (in polite requests):

***Could*** I see your driving licence?

I wonder if I ***might*** borrow some coffee?

**(b) TENTATIVE VOLITION** (in polite requests):

***Would*** you lend me a dollar? [more polite than ***will***]

I'd be grateful if someone ***would*** hold the door open.

**(C) TENTATIVE POSSIBILITY**

(I) in expressing a tentative opinion:

There ***could*** be something wrong with the light switch.

Of course, I ***might*** be wrong.

(II) in polite directives and requests:

***Could*** you (please) open the door?

You ***could*** answer these letters for me.

In these constructions, apart from the last-mentioned case of requests, ***could*** and ***might*** have the same meaning. In (cI), they both express the epistemic possibility associated with ***may.*** This is an exceptional case, in which ***could*** is the past tense equivalent of ***may*** instead of ***can.***

**NOTE:**

There is a tendency for the difference between ***may*** and ***might*** (in a sense of tentative or hypothetical possibility) to become neutralized. Thus some speakers perceive little or no difference of meaning between You may be wrong and You might be wrong. This neutralization occasionally extends, analogically, to contexts in which only might would normally be considered appropriate:

?An earlier launch of the lifeboat *may* [= *might*] have averted the tragedy. [l]

The fact that sentences such as [I] occasionally occur is a symptom of a continuing tendency to erode the distinctions between real and unreal senses of the modals.

**'Mood Markers': *Would* and *Should***

Under this last heading of 'mood markers' we consider special uses of would and should in which these modals have nothing to do with the cognate modals will and shall, but are instead used to mark the MOOD of the clause.

**(a) WOULD/SHOULD AS A MARKER OF HYPOTHETICAL MEANING**

Would (and sometimes, with a 1st person subject, should) may express hypothetical meaning in main clauses:

> If you pressed that button, the engine *would* stop. [1]
> If there were an accident, we *would/should* have to report it. [2]

Would/should + infinitive contrasts in syntactic distribution, but not in meaning, with the past tense and the were-subjunctive, both of which express hypothetical meaning in many subordinate clauses. Hence the following cannot be interpreted as unreal conditions (although they might, with some difficulty, be interpreted in some other way on open and hypothetical conditions):

> ?If you pressed that button, the engine stopped. [3]
> ?If you *would* press that button, the engine *would* stop. [4]

In [3]; the hypothetical past tense is wrongly used in the main clause, whereas in [4], the would construction is wrongly used in the subordinate clause.

Although the conditional sentence, as in [l] and [2], is the most typical context in which hypothetical would/should occurs, there are many other contexts in which hypothetical would/should is appropriately used:

> I'd hate to lose this pen. [5]
> It would be impossible to estimate how many crimes went undetected last year. [6]
> Don't bother to read all these papers. It would take too long. [7]

In such sentences, there is often an implicit if. . .; for example, [7] could be expanded: It would take too long if you did (try to read them all).

**(b) SHOULD AS A MARKER OF 'PUTATIVE' MEANING**

In this use, should + infinitive is often equivalent to the mandative subjunctive. In using should, the speaker entertains, as it were, some 'putative' world, recognizing that it may well exist or come into existence:

She insisted that we *should* stay.
It's unfair that so many people *should* lose their jobs.
Let me know if you *should* hear some more news.
Why *should* anyone object to her enjoying herself?
I can't think why he *should* have been so angry.

**NOTE:**

[a] Hypothetical would as a **'mood** marker' occurs in some types of subordinate clause; e.g. in nominal clauses (except some clauses which occur with the hypothetical past tense instead of would, e.g. clauses introduced by imperative suppose or by wish and in relative clauses:

I'm afraid the journey would be too expensive.
The journey was a disappointment to those who would have preferred to travel by road.

[b] An ironic or quasi-subjunctive use of should is current in certain Yiddishisms, especially in AmE:

I should talk. [I shouldn't talk!']
I should worry. [Why should I worry?]
I should be **so** lucky. ['I'm unlucky.']

[c] Hypothetical would when followed by a verb such as like, low, or prefer is used to indicate a tentative desire in polite requests, offers, or invitations:

A: Would you mind taking part? B: No, I'd low to.
A: Would you like some tea? B: Thanks; but I'd prefer coffee, if there is any.

**The Modals with the Perfective and Progressive aspects**

The perfective and progressive aspects are normally excluded when the modals express 'ability' or 'permission', and also when shall or will expresses 'volition'. These aspects are freely used, however, with extrinsic modal meanings other than ability; eg:

'**possibility'** He *may/might* have missed the train.

She *can't/couldn't* be swimming all day.

**'necessity'** He *must* have left his umbrella on the bus.
You *must* be dreaming.

**'prediction'** etc The guests *will/would* have arrived by that time.
Hussein *will/would* still be reading his paper.

(On the meaning of the perfective aspect after a modal, and in particular the possibility of paraphrasing it by means of the simple past tense,

'Obligation' can only be expressed with the perfective or progressive when combined with should or ought to:

**'obligation'** I *ought to* be working now. ['. . . but I'm not']
You *should have* finished it. ['. . . but you haven't']
She *shouldn't have* left him. ['. . . but she did']

As the glosses indicate, these modals, in contrast to must, often imply nonfulfillment of the obligation. There are also examples which do not have this counterfactual implication; e.g.:

Have you heard from Maria? She *should have* started her job on Monday.

The combination of both perfective and progressive constructions with the modals is also possible, subject to the conditions already mentioned:

You *must have* been dreaming.
She *couldn't have* been swimming all day.
The guests *would have been* arriving by now.

**NOTE:**

[a] The use of will + progressive in the sense of 'future as a matter of course' is paralleled by other modals in the same construction:

Jill says she *might* be calling this afternoon. [1]

means approximately 'It is just possible that Jill will be calling. . .' In contrast to [1], Jill says she might call this afternoon implies that the visit will depend on Jill's decision.

[b] Note the use of might/could + perfective in certain colloquial speech acts:

They *could/might* have told me! [a complaint]

You *could/might* have been more careful. [a rebuke]

I *might* have *KNOWN* someone would upset her. [an expression of irritation]