

Modals auxiliaries

Modal verbs are helping/auxiliary verbs that express ideas like **ability**, **permission**, **possibility**, **advice**, **obligation** and **necessity**. English modal verbs include **must**, **shall**, **will**, **should**, **would**, **can**, **could**, **may**, and **might**. Many modal verbs have more than one meaning, and they are always followed by the simple forms of verbs.

1. Modal auxiliaries to express ability

Can, be able to and could

Present/Future Ability	Negative	Past Ability	Negative
Daniel can speak English fluently.	Daniel cannot speak English.	Daniel could speak English, when he was a child.	Daniel could speak English when he was child, but he could not write well.
We can meet after class for the group work.	We can't meet tomorrow because I have another appointment.	Because Hanna explained us well, we could understand the group work and we could make good explanations.	We could not understand the group work, and we could not make good explanations.
I am able to speak two languages.	I am not able to speak Arabic.	When I was a young child, I was able to tie my shoes.	When I was a young child, I wasn't able to eat my breakfast fast.
Hile is able to run quickly.	Tergat isn't able to finish a marathon.	Hile was able to finish a marathon.	Tergat wasn't able to finish a marathon.
The twins are able to confuse there mom.	The twins are not able to confuse there mom.	The twins were able to confuse there mom.	The twins were not able to confuse there mom.

2. Modal auxiliaries to express Advice:

Should, ought to, had better

English speakers use the modal verbs “**should**,” “**ought to**” and “**had better**” to express that they think something is a good (or a bad) idea. “**Should**” is the most common way to give advice.

Look at these examples:

Affirmative	Negative
A: I failed my test. B: Really? You should study harder.	Young children shouldn't watch violent TV shows.
A: It's really cold outside. B: You ought to wear a warm jacket.	(“ought to” is not usually used in the negative form)
A: You had better slow down . You are driving too fast!	You had better not forget to pay your tuition. If you do, the university will kick you out!

These examples have the same basic advice message, but “**had better**” is a bit stronger. It includes the idea of a warning: something bad will happen if you do not follow my advice. For example:

You **had better** not forget to pay your tuition. If you forget, the university will kick you out

You **had better** do your homework. If you do not do your homework, the teacher will give you a low mark.

3. Modals auxiliaries to express suggestions: SHOULD, COULD, MIGHT, SHALL

Shouldn't we **have** a pizza instead?

You **could talk** to your parents and **ask** them.

You **might consider** taking up meditation.

Shall we **throw** a party sometime next week?

- **Might** is often used with **want** or **like** to add politeness:

Example: I thought you **might want/like to read** this.

May/might as well is often used in everyday conversation to suggest something when you can't think of anything better to do:

We **may** go for a walk.

You **might just as well order** it on the internet.

4. Modal auxiliaries to express Necessity

Necessity (something must be done) or obligation (someone must do something)

The modal verbs “**must**,” “**have to**” and “**have got to**” show that something is not optional; it is necessary.

Must is the strongest and most serious modal verb of the three and is most common in writing. It is unusual to use “must” in questions.

| I must study tonight.

Have got to is most common in informal speech. It is not used in questions.

| I have got to study tonight. = I must study tonight.

Have to is the most commonly used modal of obligation. It is useful for forming questions and negatives.

Example	Question	Answer
I have to study tonight.	Do I have to study tonight?	Yes, I do.
She has to study tonight.	Does she have to study tonight?	No, she doesn't. /Yes, she does.

There is **only one way to express past time** with these modal verbs: **HAD TO**. (There is no past tense of must/have got to.)

For example:

Present Time	Past Time
We must show our passport at the airport.	Last night, we had to show our passport at the airport.
I have got to pay my phone bill soon.	I had to pay my phone bill this morning.
They have to go to the meeting today.	They had to go to the meeting yesterday.

Expressing Obligation

Obligation may be described as pressure on a person to do something or not to do something.

There are strong obligations such as rules and necessities, and weak obligations such as advice. Obligations may be internal, from the speaker's body or mind, and external obligations such as regulations.

The Most Common Forms Used To Express Standard Obligation

A. Strong Obligation

In present, need to, must and have to are all used to express strong obligation. All three have equal strength. Often learners have difficulties with *must* and *have to* and often see little difference between the two. In brief, the rule is that *must* is used for *internal obligations*, and *have to* is used for *external obligations*.

My tooth is sore. I must go to the dentist.

To travel, you have to carry a passport.

Although this is the guiding rule, there are so many exceptions to it that it is a weak rule. The rule should be applied. You should be prepared for plenty of examples that go against it.

The negative forms of these verbs are also of interest. Compare these examples:

You must not bring food into the class.

You don't have to bring food into the class.

The first prohibits bringing food into class. The second says that it is not necessary for you to bring food in but you may.

Learners should take special care with structures such as *must have done* and *should have done*. These forms will be looked at in a later post.

B. Weak Obligation

In present, weak obligation is often described in grammar books as *the right/ correct thing to do*. Weak obligations may come from tradition, custom or culture and may be seen as advice.

Should and **ought to** are the most common verbs used. There is no difference between the two.

Often, learners are unfamiliar with *ought to* as this may be difficult to hear in conversations because it is contracted.

Our friend is unwell. We should visit him. (It is a nice thing to do.)

You ought to prepare your bags the night before your flight. (It is a good idea.)

Obligation in Past

Obligation in past is much simpler: use only **needed to** or **had to**. **Had to** is most common. There is no difference in strength or internal/ external in the past.

As mentioned earlier there are a number of other structures such as: *be supposed to*, *must have done*, *should have done* etc. These structures are not used to standard obligation and will be looked at in future posts.

More Note

Obligation

We use **have to** and **must** to express obligation. There is a slight difference between the ways we use them.

Have to shows us that the obligation comes from outside the speaker.

We have to wear a uniform when we're working in reception.

(Student to teacher) ↓

When do we have to hand in our homework?

She has to work tomorrow so she can't come. (Based on situations we sometimes call this 'external obligation')

Must expresses a strong obligation or necessity. It often shows us that the obligation comes from the speaker (or the authority that wrote the sentence).

Example:

*I **must** phone my dad. It's his birthday today. Obligation from the speaker/ internal*

You must hand in your homework on Tuesday or you will lose ten per cent of your mark. ('External obligation')

Seat belts have to be worn by all passengers. (Sign on a plane/ rule/ external obligation)

Note that we don't use *must* to express obligation in the past. We use *have to* instead.

➤ *I had to pay 600 birr to renew my driving license last week.*

More on Obligation

Present	Positive	Negative
have to / don't have to	strong obligation (possibly from outside) Children have to go to school. (sometimes 'have got to')	no obligation I don't have to work on Sundays. You don't have to eat anything you don't like.
must / mustn't	strong obligation (possibly based on the speaker's opinion/ from inside) I must study today.	negative obligation You mustn't smoke here.
should/ shouldn't	Weak/ mild obligation or advice You should save some money.	Weak/ mild negative obligation or advice You shouldn't smoke so much.

SO - NEITHER

How to use 'so' and 'neither' in English.

SO

SO is used to show agreement with **affirmative** statements concerning the speaker or another person.

SO + auxiliary + Subject (pronoun): So do I

Remember:

The Auxiliary in the response must agree with the verb tense in the original statement.

Here are some examples:

Speaker A	Speaker B	
Charlie likes chocolate.	So do I	= I like chocolate too.
Emma lives in London.	So does Amanda.	= Amanda lives in London too.
Alex can swim.	So can Jenny.	= Jenny can swim too.
Pedro is good at sports.	So is Rafael.	= Rafael is good at sports too.
Our teachers are very strict.	So are ours.	= Our teachers are very strict too.
Enzo would love to work in Paris.	So would I.	= I would love to work in Paris too.
Alex will be angry.	So will I	= I will be angry too.

NEITHER

NEITHER is used to show agreement with **negative** statements.

NEITHER can be replaced by NOR with no change in meaning.

Neither + Auxiliary + Subject (pronoun): Neither do I (Nor do I)

Remember :

The Auxiliary in the response must agree with the verb tense in the original statement.

Here are some examples:

Speaker A	Speaker B	
Sam doesn't want to go out.	Neither do I.	= I don't want to go out either.
Wendy can't cook.	Neither can I.	= I can't cook either.
Jason doesn't have a ticket.	Neither does Tom.	= Tom doesn't have a ticket either.
I can't speak Chinese.	Neither can Julie.	= Julie can't speak Chinese either.
Peter hasn't finished yet.	Neither has James.	= James hasn't finished yet either.
Meg couldn't come today.	Neither could Amy.	= Amy couldn't come either.
Dad won't pay attention.	Neither will Mum.	= Mum won't pay attention either.