

UNIT 7

Introduction to modal auxiliary verbs

1 These are the modal auxiliary verbs.

can	could	may	might	shall	should
will	would	must	ought to		

They are used with great frequency and with a wide range of meanings. They express ideas such as willingness and ability, permission and refusal, obligation and prohibition, suggestion, necessity, promise and intention. All modal auxiliary verbs can express degrees of certainty, probability, or possibility.

2 They have several characteristics.

- There is no *-s* in the third person.

He can swim.

She must go.

- There is no *do/does* in the question.

May I ask a question?

Shall we go?

- There is no *don't/doesn't* in the negative.

You shouldn't tell lies.

You won't believe this.

- They are followed by an infinitive without *to*. The exception is *ought to*.
It might rain.
Could you help?
We ought to be on our way.
- They don't really have past forms or infinitives or *-ing* forms. Other verbs are used instead.
I had to work hard when I was young.
I'd love to be able to ski.
I hate having to get up in the morning.
- They can be used with perfect infinitives to refer to the past. For more information, see Grammar Reference Unit 10 on p151.
You should have told me that you can't swim.
You might have drowned!
She must have been crazy to marry him.

Modal auxiliary verbs of probability, present and future

The main modal auxiliary verbs that express probability are described here in order of certainty. *Will* is the most certain, and *might/could* are the least certain.

will

- 1 *Will* and *won't* are used to predict a future action. The truth or certainty of what is asserted is more or less taken for granted.
I'll see you later.
His latest book will be out next month.
- 2 *Will* and *won't* are also used to express what we believe or guess to be true about the present. They indicate an assumption based on our knowledge of people and things, their routines, character, and qualities.

'You've got a letter from Canada.' 'It'll be from my aunt Freda.'
Leave the meat in the oven. It **won't be cooked** yet.

'I wonder what Sarah's doing.' 'Well, it's Monday morning, so I guess that right now she'll be **taking** the children to school.'

must and can't

- 1 *Must* is used to assert what we infer or conclude to be the most logical or rational interpretation of a situation. We do not have all the facts, so it is less certain than *will*.

You say he walked across the Sahara Desert! He **must be mad!**
You **must be joking!** I simply don't believe you.

- 2 The negative of this use is *can't*.

She **can't have** a ten-year-old daughter! She's only twenty-one herself.
'Whose is this coat?' 'It **can't be** Mary's. It's too small.'

should

- 1 *Should* expresses what may reasonably be expected to happen. Expectation means believing that things are or will be as we want them to be. This use of *should* has the idea of *if everything has gone according to plan*.

Our guests **should be** here soon (if they haven't got lost).

This homework **shouldn't take** you too long (if you've understood what you have to do).

We **should be moving** into our new house soon (as long as nothing goes wrong).

- 2 *Should* in this use has the idea that we want the action to happen. It is not used to express negative or unpleasant ideas.

You **should pass** the exam. You've worked hard.

~~*You should fail the exam.~~ You haven't done any work at all.

We would say ... I don't think you'll pass the exam.

may and might

- 1 *May* expresses the possibility that an event will happen or is happening.
*We **may go** to Greece this year. We haven't decided yet.*
*'Where's Ann?' 'She **may be having** a bath, I don't know.'*
- 2 *Might* is more tentative and slightly less certain than *may*.
*It **might rain**. Take your umbrella.*
*'Where's Peter?' 'He **might be** upstairs. There's a light on.'*
- 3 Learners of English often express these concepts of future possibility with *perhaps* or *maybe ... will* and so avoid using *may* and *might*. However, these are widely used by native speakers, and you should try to use them.

could

- 1 *Could* has a similar meaning to *might*.
*You **could be** right. I'm not sure.*
*That film **could be** worth seeing. It had a good review.*
- 2 *Couldn't* is not used to express a future possibility. The negative of *could* in this use is *might not*.
*You **might not be** right.*
*That film **might not be** any good.*
- 3 *Couldn't* has a similar meaning to *can't* above, only slightly weaker.
*She **couldn't have** a ten-year-old daughter! She's only 21 herself.*

Related verbs

Here are some related verb forms that express probability.

*William's so brainy. He's **bound to pass** the exam.*

*We're having a picnic tomorrow, so it's **bound to rain**.*

*You're **likely to find** life very different when you live in China.*

***Are you likely to come across** Judith while you're in Oxford?*



Other uses of modal auxiliary verbs and related verbs

Here is some further information about modal auxiliary verbs, but it is by no means complete. See a grammar book for more details.

Ability

- 1 *Can* expresses ability. The past is expressed by *could*.
I can speak three languages.
I could swim when I was three.
- 2 Other forms are provided by *be able to*.
*I've never **been able to** understand her.* (Present Perfect)
*I'd love **to be able to** drive.* (infinitive)
***Being able to** drive has transformed my life.* (-ing form)
*You'll **be able to** walk again soon.* (future)
- 3 To express a fulfilled ability on one particular occasion in the past, *could* is not used. Instead, we use *was able to* or *managed to*.
*She **was able to** survive by clinging onto the wrecked boat.*
*The prisoner **managed to** escape by climbing onto the roof.*

Advice

- 1 *Should* and *ought* express mild obligation or advice. *Should* is much more common.
*You **should go** to bed. You look very tired.*
*You **ought to** take things easier.*
- 2 We use *had better* to give strong advice, or to tell people what to do. There can be an element of threat – 'If you don't do this, something bad will happen.'
You'd better get a haircut before the interview. (If you don't, you won't get the job.)
I'm late. I'd better get a move on. (If I don't, I'll be in trouble.)

Note

The form is always past (*had*), but it refers to the immediate future.
She'd better start revising. The exams are next week.

Obligation

- 1 *Must* expresses strong obligation. Other verb forms are provided by *have to*.

*You **must** try harder!*

*You **mustn't** hit your baby brother.*

*What time **do** you **have to** start work?*

*I **had to** work hard to pass my exams. (Past Simple)*

*You'll **have to** do this exercise again. (future)*

*We might **have to** make some economies. (infinitive)*

*She's **never had to** do a single day's work in her life. (Present Perfect)*

*I hate **having to** get up early. (-ing form)*

- 2 *Must* expresses the opinion of the speaker.

*I **must** get my hair cut. (I am telling myself.)*

*You **must** do this again. (Teacher to student)*

Must is associated with a more formal, written style.

*Candidates **must** answer three questions. (On an exam paper)*

*Books **must** be returned by the end of the week. (Instructions in a library)*

- 3 *Have to* expresses a general obligation based on a law or rule, or based on the authority of another person.

*Children **have to** go to school until they're sixteen. (It's the law.)*

*Mum says you **have to** tidy your room.*

- 4 *Mustn't* expresses negative obligation. *Don't have to* expresses the absence of obligation.
*You **mustn't** steal. It's very naughty.*
*You **don't have to** go to England if you want to learn English.*
- 5 *Have got to* is common in British English. It is more informal than *have to*.
*I've **got to** go now. Cheerio!*
*Don't have a late night. We've **got to** get up early tomorrow.*
- 6 Here are some related verb forms that express obligation.
*Visitors **are required to** have a visa.*
*When you're 18, you're **supposed to** take responsibility for yourself.*
*You **aren't supposed to** park on double yellow lines.*
*You **need to** think carefully before you make a decision.*
*He **doesn't need to** work. He's a millionaire.*

Permission

- 1 *May, can, and could* are used to ask for permission.
May I ask you a question?
May I use your phone?
Can/Could I go home? I don't feel well.
Can/Could I borrow your car tonight?

- 2 *May* is used to give permission, but it sounds very formal. *Can* and *can't* are more common.
- You can use a dictionary in this exam.*
You can't stay up till midnight. You're only five.
You can't smoke in here. It's forbidden.
- 3 To talk about permission generally, or permission in the past, we use *can*, *could*, or *be allowed to*.
- Children can/are allowed to do what they want these days.*
I couldn't / wasn't allowed to go out on my own until I was sixteen.
- 4 Here are some related verb forms that express permission.
- Passengers are not permitted to use mobile phones.*
My parents don't allow me to
I'm not allowed to stay out late.
My parents don't let me
- Note that this sentence with *let* is not possible in the passive.
 *~~*I'm not let ...*~~

Willingness and refusal

- 1 *Will* expresses willingness. *Won't* expresses a refusal by either people or things. *Shall* is used in questions.
- I'll help you.*
She says she won't get up until she's had breakfast in bed.
The car won't start.
Shall I give you a hand?
- 2 The past is expressed by *wouldn't*.
- My mum said she wouldn't give me any more money. Isn't she mean?*

Requests

Several modal verbs express a request.

Can/could/will/would you do me a favour?
Can/could I open the window?

Modal verbs are also dealt with in Units 9, 10, and 11.

1 Meaning check

Choose the correct explanation for each of these modals.

- 1 Amy may look for a new job.
 - a Amy has permission to look for a new job.
 - b It's possible Amy will look for a new job.

- 2 I couldn't swim until I was 16.
 - a I wasn't allowed to swim until I was 16.
 - b I wasn't able to swim until I was 16.

- 3 No one can smoke in the cinema.
 - a No one is able to smoke in the cinema.
 - b No one is allowed to smoke in the cinema.

- 4 You should wear glasses.
 - a My advice is that you wear glasses.
 - b It's possible that you will have to wear glasses.

- 5 Will you answer the phone?
- a Are you at some time in the future going to answer the phone?
 - b I'm asking you to answer the phone.
- 6 I couldn't get the top off the jar.
- a I wasn't allowed to get the top off the jar.
 - b I didn't manage to get the top off the jar.
- 7 You must be tired.
- a I'm sure you are tired.
 - b You are required to be tired.
- 8 Andy's very busy so he may not go to the party.
- a Andy doesn't have permission to go to the party.
 - b There's a possibility Andy won't go to the party.

2 Which modal?

- 1 Complete the sentences with correct words from the box.
Often there is more than one answer.

will	should	can	ought to	could
must	may	have to	might	

- 1 You _____ get your hair cut. It's too long.
- 2 _____ I ask you a question?
- 3 Young children _____ be carried on this escalator.
- 4 You _____ never get a seat on this train. It's always packed.
- 5 I _____ be studying Mandarin Chinese next year.
- 6 I _____ already speak five languages fluently.
- 7 You'll _____ work much harder if you want to pass.
- 8 It's Saturday night. There _____ be something good on TV.
- 9 You _____ leave your valuables in the hotel safe.
- 10 You _____ be over 1m 60 cm tall to be a flight attendant.