

Modal Verbs



There is a very special group of verbs in English called modal verbs. They are the rebels of English verbs because they don't follow the rules of the rest of the thousands of verbs we find in English. Some people love them because they don't have to worry about the rules of all the other verbs when they use modals. Some people hate them because they refuse to follow the rules like all the other verbs. Love them or hate them, they are some of the most useful verbs in English and we need to know how to use them properly, so they don't get us into trouble.

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The forms of modal verbs
- Modals in the past, present and future
- The changing meanings of modals
(Modals breaking the rules)

What are modals?

Modal verbs are a special group of verbs that follow their own rules. We have to pay special attention to them because they cause trouble if we treat them the same as all the other verbs.

They do not change the meaning of the verbs that follow them, but they change the meaning of the sentences they are in. For example, these two sentences have very different meanings:

1. You must study more.
2. You should study more.

Here is a list of modal verbs:

Will
Would
Shall
Should
Can
Could
Might
May
Must
Ought to

Modals in the present.

In the present tense, modal verbs behave differently than other verbs. They have only ONE form. There is no third-person s with modal verbs. Look at the verbs below and note that in the he/she/it form, verbs take an s, but not for modals.

Have	Want	Run	Must	Can
I have	I want	I run	I must	I can
You have	You want	You run	You must	You can
He <u>has</u>	He <u>wants</u>	He <u>runs</u>	He must	He can
We have	We want	We run	We must	We can
They have	They want	They run	They must	They can

You can see that the third person form (he/she/it) does not take an 's' in the present simple, like all the other verbs do.

Modals in the future.

Modals once again break the rules when you try to put them into future time. The other verbs can use that little word “will” to make it future (just add an infinitive – I will go soon. I will study later. I think I will have chicken rice for lunch).

However, modals cannot stick with the word “will”. Why not? Because “will” is also a modal verb and we cannot use too modals verbs together. They are very independent and don’t like to have other modals verbs anywhere near them. Don’t put two modals together, or they’ll give you trouble (*I will can help you tomorrow* is WRONG and the sentence will fall apart). See the section “perfect infinitive” to find out why.

So how do we express the ideas that modal verbs give us in the future? Simple!! We just use the present form for the present time and we also use the present form for the future time. It’s that easy.

Here are some examples of modals in the present and future. Notice that they don’t change.

Present

I can help you now.
I must work now.
You should study now.
He might be hungry now.

Future

I can help you tomorrow.
I must work next week.
You should study art next year.
He might be hungry after work.

Past forms

When we put modal verbs in the past we run into problems. Some modals have past tense forms, so it’s easy to make them. They are irregular so you have to learn them.

Here are the modals that have past tense forms:

Can	Could
Shall	Should
Will	Would
Must	(Had to)

The other modal verbs do not have past tense forms. The next section on perfect infinitives will show you how to deal with those rebellious ones. Note, though, that *must* in the past sometimes becomes HAD TO (past of have to) since *have to* and *must* are similar.

Perfect infinitive

So what do we do with those modals (*might, may* – and sometimes *must, can/can't* and *should*)? *Note that sometimes *should* is the past of *shall* and sometimes it is a present tense verb with a different meaning – see *should* and *ought to* below.

These verbs in the past require a special construction. Since they have no past tense, we use the modal verb in the present and add a perfect infinitive. A perfect infinitive is *have* + a past participle (see the unit on verb tenses for more information on the perfect tense). The perfect form in English always uses a form of *have* + a *past participle*, like in the sentence: He has just shown his artwork (*has* is present and *shown* is past participle). This sentence is in the present perfect (because *has* is in the present tense). With a perfect infinitive *have* is an infinitive and then the past participle follows – He should have done the assignment. In this sentence, *should* is present, *have* is infinitive and *done* is past participle (note that we cannot say *He should has done* his assignment, because *he* + *has* is present tense and we need *have* to be an infinitive. Let's look at the sentence in this way:

He should have done his assignment.

 Present / Infinitive / Past
 Tense / participle

This sentence means that he didn't do his assignment, but that was not the right thing. Maybe now he regrets it (maybe he failed his exam).

Remember, that infinitives have no verb tense and no person (I, he, she, we, etc...). The infinitive form is the form found in the dictionary. It is sometimes called the dictionary form or the base form of the verb. Infinitives are important when we talk about modal verbs because there is one rule they DO follow:

MODAL VERB + INFINITIVE

A modal verb can be followed by a perfect infinitive because the *have* part is an infinitive. Modals always need an infinitive verb with them so that they make sense. That is the reason why we cannot have two modals together. Not only do they NOT have a future tense (and some are without past tense), but they are also missing an infinitive form. It is not possible to find *can, must, should, etc.* in the infinitive form, because it does not exist for them. So, we cannot put two modals together simply because modals do not have infinitives and they must stick to the rule above: modal verb + infinitive.

More infinitives

...and more trouble from the modals.

Because English has more verb forms than just the present and past, we also have more than one or two infinitive forms to help out the modal verbs. Let's use the word "might" this time. "Might" is a wonderful word that simply lets people know that you are not sure. It means "maybe something is happening".

Below is a table showing how we can change a sentence from present or past (simple, continuous, perfect) to a modal (might) with an infinitive. On the left side the sentence without the modal verb shows that the speaker is sure that the situation is true. On the right side, the speaker has inserted the word "might" showing that he or she is not so certain the situation is true or happening.

Sentence without Modal Verb	Sentence with Modal Verb and Infinitive
She is angry. Present Simple	She might be angry. Might + simple infinitive
She is crying . Present Continuous	She might be crying . Might + continuous infinitive
She left / She has left . Past (simple or perfect)	She might have left . Might + perfect infinitive
She has been stealing . Past Continuous	She might have been stealing . Might + perfect continuous infinitive .

Must and Can't

This section (and the next 10 sections) will demonstrate how modals can have different meanings and sometimes require different forms. The first is MUST and CAN'T.

Must has a few meanings:

1. You have no choice but to do something. (You must do your homework).
 2. You think someone should do something. (You must try this new restaurant).
 3. You feel strongly that something is true. (You must be very angry with me).
- This is the positive of CAN'T – meaning 4.

Can has a few meanings too:

1. Ability (He can speak French).
2. Permission (Can I go to the restroom please?)
3. Possibility (We can/could go to a movie tonight).
4. (in the negative CAN'T) You feel strongly something is not true. (You can't be tired – you just woke up!) This is the negative of must – meaning 3.

The following table shows how the past tense forms of MUST and CAN'T. Remember that MUST has no past form, so we use HAD TO. The exception is with MUST to show that you feel something is true. We have to use a perfect infinitive in this meaning. The negative is CAN'T, which also uses a perfect infinitive for the past, instead of using COULD. These two verbs MUST and CAN'T should be studied together since they are a positive (+ and -) pair.

<u>PRESENT</u>	<u>PAST</u>
You must pay your taxes.	You had to pay your taxes.
You must read this book.	You had to read this book.
You must be tired today.	You <u>must have been</u> tired yesterday.
He can speak Russian.	He could speak Russian many years ago.
You can smoke in the other room.	You could smoke everywhere in the past.
We can try the new café.	*We could (were able to) try the café.
You can't need more money!	You <u>can't have needed</u> more money!

You can see from the above table that *must/can't* with their special meanings (when you believe strongly that something is true (or not) will have a past tense with a perfect infinitive. Usually the past of MUST is HAD NOT and the past of CAN is COULD, but with this meaning we simply use *must* or *can't* with the perfect infinitive. Note that this does not happen with *can* in the positive (only the negative).

Here are a few more examples of *must* and *can't* as opposites:

You haven't eaten all day. You *must* be hungry.
You have just finished lunch. You *can't* be hungry.

She locked herself in the bathroom. She *must* be crying.
I just heard her laughing. She *can't* be crying.

Nobody is answering the door. They *must* have gone out.
I can hear music from inside. They *can't* have gone out.

Their clothes are all dirty. They *must* have been playing football.
Their clothes are still clean. They *can't/couldn't* have been playing football.

* It is possible (and necessary) at times to use *be able to* as the past of *can* (instead of *could*). See the next section *Can and Be able to* for more information.

** It is also possible to say *Couldn't* have done instead of *Can't* have done. *Can't have done* is for belief and *Couldn't have done* is for belief or ability (both meanings).

Can't have done (belief) and couldn't have done (belief and ability)

In the previous section, we saw how *can* (*can't*) is sometimes the negative of *must* and that in the past we must use *can't have been* or *can't have done* (*could do* is not possible). However it is possible to use *could* + perfect infinitive:

You *can't* have been hungry so soon after lunch.
You *couldn't* have been hungry so soon after lunch.

However, when *could* refers to ability, *can't have done/been*, etc. is impossible. Refer to the table below.

	Can't	Couldn't
Belief	She <i>can't</i> have seen your note.	She <i>couldn't</i> have seen your note.
Ability	Not possible	You <i>couldn't</i> have saved him.

Can and Be Able to

In the last section we saw that the modal verb *can* has a number of meanings. We now will concentrate on the first meaning – ability.

Can very often means that you know how to do something or that a situation is such that you are able to do something. *To Be Able* means the same as *can* in this way. It is not so common to see *be able to* used like *can* for the other three meaning listed in the previous section. There are some differences, however, between *can* and *be able to*.

First let's have a look at two kinds of ability. One is general ability (something that you can always do, like speak a language) and specific ability (something that you can do in a certain situation).

General Ability

Speak a language
Swim
Cook Japanese food
Draw
Sing

Specific Ability

Pass a test
Win a race
Find a missing wallet
Sell a painting.
Win Singapore Idol

As you can see, you can always do the things listed under general ability. If you can speak Italian, you can speak it every day – it doesn't require a special situation to have this ability. The things listed under specific ability are things that happen only once in a specific situation or at one point in time. You might win Singapore Idol this year but a better singer might win it next year!

How are they different?

In the present tense, *can* and *be able to* are the same and you can switch them without any difference in meaning. So, you can say. "I can play piano" OR "I am able to play piano". However, in the past we must use *can* for general ability and *be able to* for specific ability. If the verb is negative, however, we can use either *can* or *be able to* again. The only difference you have to learn is:

1. when there is a difference between general and specific;
2. when it is in the past;
3. AND when the sentence is positive

If the above three things are not included, then you have the choice between *can* and *be able to*. If all three things are included, then you only have the one choice - to use *be able to* (*was / were able to* since it is in the past).

There is another expression which means the same as *be able to*. It is *manage to*. We use *manage to* only when the possibility of doing something is smaller. For example:

The test was hard, but I *was able to* pass. There was a terrible accident, but I *managed to* get out alive.

The table below will help you see where the difference is.

	General Ability	Specific Ability
Present +	I can speak Chinese. I am able to speak Chinese.	I can solve this problem. I am able to solve this problem.
Present -	I can't swim. I am not able to swim.	I can't find my credit card. I am not able to find my credit card.
Past +	I could play hockey as a child. I was able to play hockey as a child	XX <i>Could</i> is not possible here. XX I was able to pass the exam last week.
Past -	He couldn't tell the time till he was eleven years old. He wasn't able to tell the time till he was eleven years old.	He couldn't escape the police. He wasn't able to escape the police.

Can in Singapore

Modal verbs can? This is a common way to use can in Singapore, but it does not follow the conventions of standard English in any English speaking country. This in fact is correct format in Chinese as well as in Malay, but not in English. To use *can* correctly, a full subject and verb is required. The table below shows a few examples of correct and incorrect usage of *can* in the Singapore context.

INCORRECT	CORRECT
Can speak English?	Can you speak English?
4:00 can?	Can we meet at 4:00?
Go by taxi can? – Can!	Can we go by taxi? – Yes we can.
Everything can.	Anything's possible. We can do anything.
This one cannot.	We cannot do (accept) this.

*A more detailed study of the differences between standard English and Singlish can be found in the chapter “Singlish to English”.

Must Mustn't Needn't Don't have to

As we saw in the section about Must and Can't, must has multiple meanings, just like can does. In its most commonly known (or at least studied) usage, must is used when it is necessary to do something, or when someone doesn't have a choice. The meaning is the same as have to.

You must always respect your parents. You always have to respect your parents.

You must finish your work on time. You have to finish your work on time.

These verbs can also be used to show a personal feeling.

You must read this book! It's great! You have to read this book! It's great!

In the negative however, must and have to (or mustn't and don't have to) have very different meanings. See the table for examples.

	Necessary (no choice)	Not necessary. (choice)
MUST	You must come to school on Saturday.	XX impossible XX
HAVE TO	You have to come to school on Saturday.	You don't have to come to school on Saturday.
MUST	You must not take that book.	XX impossible XX
HAVE TO	XX impossible XX	You don't have to take that book.

Needn't (don't need to) is the same as don't have to.

You don't have to come to school on the weekend.

You needn't come to school on the weekend.

However in the past, *have to do* becomes *didn't have to do* (infinitive) and *needn't do* becomes *needn't have done* (perfect infinitive) and there is a change in meaning again (see below).

You didn't need to bring the key. (It was not necessary to bring the key. We do not know if the person brought it or not.)

You needn't have brought the key. (It was not necessary to bring the key, but we do know that the person actually brought the key.)

Future Shall and Suggestion Shall

Shall, like *must* and *can*, has different meanings and uses. The two most common uses of *shall* are to express future (instead of *will*) and to make suggestions or offers. Look at these examples. Which ones make suggestions, make offers or suggest future?

1. I shall never return to this country again.
2. Shall we go to a few galleries this afternoon?
3. What shall I do?
4. Shall I get you a cup of tea?
5. Please wait here. I shall not be long (sometimes people say *shan't* as the negative of *shall* – like *will* and *won't*).

The past of *shall* is *should* and the subjunctive form of *shall* is also *should*, which we use for hypothetical situations.

Compare:

Past of Shall

- When I was young, I knew I should become a great doctor. (This is like saying, “When I was young, I knew I would become a great doctor.”)
- It was such a difficult situation; I didn’t know what I should do. (This is like saying, “It was such a difficult situation; I didn’t know what I would do.”)

Hypothetical

- If I were you, I should try harder to succeed.
- If I knew her number, I should call her to explain.

Both of these examples show a hypothetical (or conditional here) situation. It is also possible to use *would* here instead of *should*, since one can often mean the same as the other. Note that *shall/should* is more formal than *will/would*.

Should, Ought to and Had Better

As you saw earlier in this lesson, *should* is the past of *shall* (see future *shall* and suggestion *shall* above). However, there is another meaning for *should* which is to give advice or to show that something is a good idea (or a bad idea if it’s negative – *shouldn't*). It can also be used for making suggestions (also above).

There is another modal verb which is not as common as *should* and is more often heard more in some English speaking countries than in others. It is the modal verb *ought to*. It can be used in the same way as *should*, but in the negative, *ought to* loses the **to** and is simply *ought not*. Look at the examples in the table below.

Should	Ought to
+ You should practice your Japanese.	+ You ought to practice your Japanese.
+ You should have helped him.	+ You ought to have helped him.
- You shouldn't smoke so much.	- You ought not smoke so much.
- You shouldn't have scolded her.	- You ought not have scolded her.

As you can see, both should and ought to can be used to give advice or indicate a good or bad idea (positive or negative). Should and ought to in this case are both present tense and can be used in the future without change and in the past by using a perfect infinitive (or other infinitives depending on the situation – see the table of modals and infinitives above).

There is another expression that gives advice but it is much stronger than *should* or *ought to*. It is *had better*. It also tells us that the speaker is giving advice but it is stronger because it means that if you don't follow the advice, something bad will happen. Note that even though there is no change in "had" (I, you, he, she, etc.), it is not actually a modal verb. It is the past of "have".

For example:

You should study more (to get a better mark). You had better study more (to pass).

You should stop smoking (it's not healthy). You had better stop smoking (there are already serious health problems).

You ought to take an umbrella (it might rain). You had better take an umbrella (it's going to rain in a few minutes, so if you don't take an umbrella you will get wet).

Will, Should and Going to for prediction

The modal verbs will and should, as well as going to can all be used to express prediction (what you think will happen in the future).

- Use “will” or “should” when you are predicting something because you know a person or situation well. (Will is stronger than should).
“She *should* get the scholarship. She is really smart.”
“He *will* pass the test. He studies so hard every day.”
- Use “going to” when you are predicting something that is in front of you. You can see the situation and what is going to happen next.”
“He doesn’t see that bus coming. He *is going to* have an accident.”
“The sky is really dark and the wind is blowing. It *is going to* rain.”

Remember that after modals like will, should (or going to), use an infinitive. You can see part of this section in the chapter Verb Tenses.

Another use for *should* is to indicate that something is not as it supposed to be.

He should be home by now.
She should have called by now.
That lamp should be in the bedroom.
Shouldn't you be at work?

Will future and Will volition

We often associate the word *will* with future tenses, and of course we should. In the verb tense chapter of this series, you can see that *will* makes up a part of four of our twelve basic verb tenses and is also used in making predictions about the future, which can also be found in that section of verb tenses.

However, like all the other modals, *will* carries with it multiple meanings and usages. It also carries the idea of **volition**. Volition simply means willingness (you can see with word will in **willingness**). We use will to say that somebody wants, or at least is willing, to do something. Compare the following sentences:

FUTURE: I will arrive at school tomorrow at 8:00
VOLITION: Don’t worry, I will help you whenever you need me.

FUTURE: Will you be at the party tomorrow?
VOLITION: Will you show me how to do this?

FUTURE: I won’t be working at that time.
VOLITION: I won’t tell a lie for you. (In this sentence, *won't* is similar to *refuse to*.)

Might and May + conditional

It is often considered that *might* is the past of *may*. This can be done, but in most sentences, *might* and *may* have the same meaning and can be used in the future, present or past. They are mostly interchangeable anywhere you wish to use them. For example:

It might rain tomorrow.

It may rain tomorrow.

He might be stuck in traffic now.

He may be stuck in traffic now.

She might have left her purse on the train last night.

She may have left her purse on the train last night.

NOTE: In the last two sentences, both *might* and *may* require perfect infinitives in order to be used in the past.

There are a few places, however, where *may* and *might* are NOT interchangeable.

1. *May* means permission (May I interrupt for a moment?), but *might* does not.
2. *Might* can be past of *may* (“I **may** work in Japan next year.” – He said he **might** work in Japan next year.)
3. You can use *might* in Conditional III sentences, but not *may*.
If he had had more money, he may have bought the car. **INCORRECT**
If he had had more money, he might have bought the car. **CORRECT**

NOTE: It is possible to say “*He may have bought the car,*” but it is not part of a conditional situation. It means that somebody bought the car – maybe it was him. “*He might have bought the car,*” in a conditional sentence, means that he did not buy it, but if he had had more money, maybe he would have bought it.

May Be and Maybe

Don't confuse maybe with may be. Maybe is an adverb, which means perhaps. May + be is the modal + infinitive be. If you use maybe, you must still have a verb! Have a look at the examples.

He **may be** hungry after traveling all day.

May = modal verb

Be = infinitive (main verb)

Maybe he **is** hungry after traveling all day.

Maybe = adverb

Is = main verb (the only verb of the sentence)

Would + conditional

For a full study of would in the conditional (II, III and mixed conditional), see the chapter on hypothetical forms.

Will would can could shall should for politeness

Politeness can be expressed in many ways, like with please and thank you or with Madam and Sir. Modals are also used to show degrees of politeness.

Asking for something:

- Will you get me a new notebook?
- Would you get me a new notebook?
- Can you get me a new notebook?
- Could you get me a new notebook?
- Would you mind getting me a new notebook?

As you can see in the examples, *will/would* is not as polite as *can/could*, and using the past of *will* is more polite than in the present, like *can* is more polite in the past than the present. That is because they are actually subjunctive forms (not really past) and they show that the speaker doesn't make assumptions about whether the other person will get the notebook or not. The last sentence uses *would you mind*, which is more polite than all the others because it asks whether the request would be a bother or not.

Offering something

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Do you want a cup of coffee? | No modal (not so polite – somewhat informal). |
| Would you like a cup of coffee? | Would you like (polite). |
| Can I get you a cup of coffee? | Now the speaker asks if he or she can do something for the other person (very polite). |

Offering / Suggesting

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Do you want me to open the window? | Like above, no modal (not so polite). |
| Would you like me to open the window? | As with would above (polite). |
| Shall I open the window? | The speaker has taken the responsibility from the other person and has taken it onto him or herself and doesn't use "you" (very polite). |

EXERCISES

EXERCISE A

The following passage contains modal verbs, but the main verbs are in the infinitive and in brackets (). Write the correct form of the modal and the main verb in the space.

Last week I had an art history exam. Our lecturer told us we (must/study) _____, but I thought I (will/pass) _____ easily without studying. The night before the exam, I decided I (should/go) _____ down the pub and relax, so that I (will/be) _____ in good form for the next day. I knew I (will/get) _____ an A without looking at the book. I decided I (should/have) _____ a few more bottles of beer since I was in such good shape with art history.

The next morning I woke up and saw that I only had 30 minutes to the start of the exam. I (should/set) _____ my alarm! I immediately jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom and my head started pounding with a terrible headache. Too many drinks! I (should/not/have) _____ so much beer. After a five-minute shower I got dressed and ran to school. Luckily I lived on campus. My friends told me I (should/not/move) _____ in to the campus flats, but now I'm glad I had already made my arrangements. School was a few minutes walk.

When I arrived at the examination hall, everyone was just getting seated and I sat down and looked at the paper. I read the first question, but (can/not/understand) _____ it. I went to the next one and (can/not/answer) _____ that one either. I thought something (must/be) _____ wrong with my paper. The lecturer (can/not/give) _____ out the right paper. I asked if there had been a mistake, but my lecturer said that this was indeed the right paper and that I (should/get) _____ to work.

I only need five minutes to read the paper to realize that I (should/not/go) _____ to the pub, I (should/not/drink) _____ beer the night before the exam, that I (should/stay) _____ home to study and that I (will/fail) _____ the exam miserably.

EXERCISE B

Write a short composition like the one above using modal verbs in as many instances as you can. Use them in the past, present and future. Use as many of the different meanings as you can. Have a friend, teacher or tutor check your accuracy with modal verbs.

ANSWER KEY

Exercise A

Last week I had an art history exam. Our lecturer told us we **had to** study, but I thought I **would pass** easily without studying. The night before the exam, I decided I **should go** down the pub and relax, so that I **would be** in good form for the next day. I knew I **would get** an A without looking at the book. I decided I **should have** a few more bottles of beer since I was in such good shape with art history.

The next morning I woke up and saw that I only had 30 minutes to the start of the exam. I **should have set** my alarm! I immediately jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom and my head started pounding with a terrible headache. Too many drinks! I **shouldn't have had** so much beer. After a five minute shower I got dressed and ran to school. Luckily I lived on campus. My friends told me I **shouldn't have moved** into the campus flats, but now I'm glad I had already made my arrangements. School was a few minutes walk.

When I arrived at the examination hall, everyone was just getting seated and I sat down and looked at the paper. I read the first question, but **couldn't understand** it. I went to the next one and **couldn't answer** that one either. I thought something **must have been** wrong with my paper. The lecturer **can't have given** out the right paper. I asked if there had been a mistake, but my lecturer said that this was indeed the right paper and that I **should get** to work.

I only need five minutes to read the paper to realize that I **shouldn't have gone** to the pub, I **shouldn't have drunk** beer the night before the exam, that I **should have stayed** home to study and that I **would fail** the exam miserably.