

MODAL VERBS

A modal is a type of auxiliary (helping) verb that is used to express: ability, possibility, permission or obligation. Modal phrases (or semi-modals) are used to express the same things as modals, but are a combination of auxiliary verbs and the preposition to. The modals and semi-modals in English are:

1. Can/could/be able to
2. May/might
3. Shall/should
4. Must/have to
5. Will/would

1.Can, Could, Be Able To

Can, could and be able to are used to express a variety of ideas in English:

Ability/Lack of Ability

Present and Future:

can/can't + base form of the verb

1. Tom can write poetry very well.
2. I can help you with that next week.
3. Lisa can't speak French.

am / is / are / will be + able to + base form of the verb

am not/ isn't / aren't/ won't be + able to + base form of the verb

1. Mike is able to solve complicated math equations
2. The support team will be able to help you in about ten minutes.
3. I won't be able to visit you next summer.

Past:

could / couldn't + base form of the verb

1. When I was a child I could climb trees.

was / were + able to + base form of the verb

wasn't / weren't + able to + base form of the verb

hasn't / haven't + been able to + base form of the verb

1. I wasn't able to visit her in the hospital.
2. He hasn't been able to get in touch with the client yet.

Note: Can and could do not take an infinitive (to verb) and do not take the future auxiliary will.

- Incorrect: I can to help you this afternoon.
- Correct: I can help you this afternoon.
- Correct: I will (I'll) be able to help you this afternoon.

Possibility / Impossibility

can / can't + base form of the verb

1. You can catch that train at 10:43.
2. He can't see you right now. He's in surgery.

could + base form of the verb

1. I could fly via Amsterdam if I leave the day before.

Ask Permission / Give Permission

Can + Subject + base form of the verb (informal)

1. Can you lend me ten dollars?

Can + base form of the verb (informal)

1. You can borrow my car.

Could + subject + base form of the verb (polite)

1. Could I have your number?
2. Could I talk to your supervisor please?

Make a suggestion – To make a suggestion use:

Could + base form of the verb (informal)

1. You could take the tour of the castle tomorrow.

Exercises: Can, Could, Be able to

Fill in the correct form of can, could or be able to as in the examples.

1. Ben could not help his little brother with his homework yesterday.
2. Can I call you later tonight?
1. _____ Tony run long distances when he was a boy?
2. _____ you please call a tow truck for me? My car broke down. (polite)
3. The student's _____ to buy their textbooks today. The bookstore is all out of them.
4. _____ you teach me how to fix my computer? You're so good at it.
5. _____ you _____ reach the customer if you call him at 4:00 his time?

Answers:

1. Could
 2. Could
 3. aren't able
 4. Can
 5. Will/be able to
2. May, Might

Formal Permission / Formal Prohibition

may / may not + base form of the verb

1. You may start your exam now.
2. You may not wear sandals to work.

Polite Request

May + subject + base form of the verb

1. May I help you?

Possibility / Negative Possibility

may/ might + base form of the verb

1. We may go out for dinner tonight. Do you want to join us?
2. Our company might get the order if the client agrees to the price.

may not / might not + base form of the verb

1. Adam and Sue may not buy that house. It's very expensive.
2. They might not buy a house at all.

To Make a Suggestion (when there is no better alternative)

may as well / might as well + base form of the verb

1. You may as well come inside. John will be home soon.
2. We might as well take Friday off. There's no work to be done anyway.

Polite Suggestion

might + base form of the verb

1. You might like to try the salmon fillet. It's our special today.

Exercises: May / Might

Fill in the correct form of may or might as in the example.

1. May I sit here?
1. They _____ finish the project on time. The main engineer is ill.
2. You _____ want to stop by the museum gift shop on your way out.
3. _____ I have your autograph?
4. He _____ visit the Louvre. He's in Paris anyway.
5. You _____ park your car here. It's reserved for guests of the hotel only.

Answers:

1. might not
2. might
3. May
4. may as well
5. may not

3. Shall, Should, Ought to

To Offer of Assistance or Polite Suggestion (When you are quite sure of a positive answer)

Shall + subject + base form of the verb

1. Shall we go for a walk?

Note: Shall is only used with I or we. It is used instead of will only in formal English.

To Offer of Assistance or Polite Suggestion (When you are not sure of a positive answer)

Should + subject + base form of the verb

1. Should I call a doctor?

A Prediction or Expectation that Something Will Happen

should/shouldn't + base form of the verb

1. The proposal should be finished on time.
2. I shouldn't be late. The train usually arrives on time.

To Give Advice

should / ought to + base form of the verb

1. You should check that document before you send it out.
2. You ought to have your car serviced before the winter.

To Give Advice (about something you think wrong or unacceptable)

shouldn't + base form of the verb

1. James shouldn't teach him words like those.

Exercises: Should, Shouldn't, Ought To

Fill in should, shouldn't or ought in the following sentences as in the example.

1. He shouldn't encourage such bad behavior.
1. You _____ get your teeth cleaned at least once a year.
2. The house _____ be ready to move into by next month. It's almost finished.
3. Ron _____ to improve his attitude. If he doesn't, he might get fired.
4. _____ I get your jacket? It's cold in here.
5. You _____ put your feet on the table. It's not polite.

Answers:

1. should
2. should
3. ought

4. shall

5. shouldn't

4. Must, Have to, Need to, don't have to, Needn't

Necessity or Requirement

Present and Future:

must / have to / need to + base form of the verb

1. You must have a passport to cross the border.
2. Elisabeth has to apply for her visa by March 10th.
3. I need to drop by his room to pick up a book.

Past:

had to / needed to + base form of the verb

1. I had to work late last night.
2. I needed to drink a few cups of coffee in order to stay awake.

Note: have to and need to are often used in the same context, but many times, need to is used to express something that is less urgent, something in which you have a choice.

Almost 100% Certain

must + base form of the verb

1. Thomas has lived in Paris for years. His French must be very good.

To Persuade

must / have to + base form of the verb

1. You must try this wine. It's excellent.
2. You have to visit us while you're in town.

Prohibited or Forbidden

must not / mustn't + base form of the verb

1. You must not drive over the speed limit.
2. You mustn't leave medicines where children can get to them.

Lack of Necessity

1. don't / doesn't / didn't + have to + base form of the verb

2. You don't have to park the car. The hotel valet will do it for you.
3. Tim doesn't have to go to school today. It's a holiday.
4. You didn't have to shout. Everyone could hear you.

Needn't + base form of the verb

1. You needn't worry about me. I'll be fine.

Exercises: Must, Have to, Need to, Don't Have to, Needn't

Fill in the blanks with one of these Modals:

must, must not, have to, has to, don't have to, doesn't have to, needn't as in the examples.

1. You _____ tell Anna about the party tomorrow night. It's a surprise! (must not, need to, doesn't have to)
2. Tina _____ register for her classes on Monday, otherwise she won't get a place in them. (doesn't have to, mustn't, has to)
3. You _____ send that fax. I've already sent it. (must, will have to, don't have to)
4. A dog _____ get special training in order to be a guide dog. (must, need to, don't have to)
5. Jeremy _____ get up early tomorrow. His class was cancelled. (mustn't, doesn't have to, don't need to)

Answers:

1. must not
2. has to
3. don't have to
4. must
5. doesn't have to

5.Modals: Will / Would

will / won't + base form of the verb

1. John will pick you up at 7:00am.
2. Beth won't be happy with the results of the exam.

Polite Request or Statement

Will / Would + base form of the verb

1. Will you please take the trash out?
2. Would you mind if I sat here?
3. I'd (I would) like to sign up for your workshop.

Habitual Past Action

Would/Wouldn't + base form of the verb

1. When I was a child, I would spend hours playing with my train set.
2. Peter wouldn't eat broccoli when he was a kid. He loves it now.

Exercises: will, would

Fill in the blanks with one of the following words: will, won't, would, wouldn't.

1. I _____ like to order the onion soup please.
2. The manager _____ be pleased to hear that a customer slipped on the wet floor.
3. _____ it be okay if I slept here tonight?
4. When Igor lived in Russia, he _____ call his mother as often as he does now.
5. I can assure you sir, the order _____ be shipped out tonight.

Answers:

1. would
2. won't
3. would
4. wouldn't
5. will

Exercises – All Modals

Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the following modals:

can, could, be able to, may, might, shall, should, must, have to, don't have to, need to

1. If you are sick, you _____ go to work. You'll infect everyone there.
2. Driver's _____ stop at red lights.
3. You _____ finish the proposal today. You can finish it tomorrow.
4. She _____ hear much better with her new hearing aids.
5. _____ I order us a bottle of wine?
6. Sam _____ pick his daughter up from school. She's taking the bus home.
7. You _____ smoke here. It's a smoke-free building.
8. You _____ eat so many sweets. They are bad for you.
9. _____ you mind walking a little faster? We're going to be late.
10. I'm sorry. I _____ help you. I don't know how to do it.

Answers:

1. shouldn't
2. must
3. don't have to
4. can
5. shall
6. needn't
7. mustn't
8. shouldn't

9. would

10. can't

