

MODAL VERBS

FORM	MEANING / USE	EXAMPLES
Permission: can, could, may, might, be allowed to		
can could may might	to ask for permission less direct, more polite more formal, less common less direct, more formal style	<i>Can I borrow your dictionary?</i> <i>Could I ask you a personal question?</i> <i>May I make a suggestion?</i> <i>Might I make a suggestion?</i>
can may	to give permission	<i>You can borrow my camera if you want to.</i> <i>"Could I make a suggestion?" "Of course, you may."</i>
can('t) be (not) allowed to	to talk about things that are permitted or not permitted	<i>You can drive/ are allowed to drive a car in Britain when you are seventeen. You can't smoke here.</i>
could was/were allowed to	to say that we had <u>general permission</u> to do something in the past	<i>When we were children, we could stay up/ were allowed to stay up late on Saturday nights.</i>
was/were allowed to	to say that someone had permission to do something and they did it <u>in a particular past situation</u>	<i>The children were allowed to stay up until midnight last night. (not 'could')</i>
Obligation and Advice: should, ought to, had better, be supposed to, shall		
should ought to	to talk about obligation, to ask for and give advice, and, in general, to say what is right or good	<i>"What should I do?" "You should stop smoking."</i> <i>You oughtn't to tell lies. (We often prefer 'ought to' to talk about authority which comes from outside the speaker eg from laws or rules.)</i>
had better	to express a strong recommendation in a particular situation. (<i>had better</i> often suggests a kind of threat or warning, and is stronger than <i>should/ought to</i>)	<i>I think it's going to rain. You'd better take an umbrella. It's very late. I'd better go now.</i>
be supposed to	to talk about what people are expected to do because of an arrangement, a rule, or a duty. (we also use <i>supposed to</i> to mean 'said to')	<i>You're supposed to start work at 8.00.</i> <i>You know you're not supposed to smoke here. (That book is supposed to be very good.)</i>
shall	to ask for opinion, advice or instructions	<i>I've missed the bus. What shall I do?</i> <i>Shall I apply for the job or not?</i> <i>How long shall I cook this spaghetti?</i>
Requests: can, could, may, might, will, would		
can could may might	to ask for things less direct and more polite more formal more polite than <i>may</i>	<i>Can I have a glass of water, please?</i> <i>Could I have the bill, please?</i> <i>May I have some more coffee?</i> <i>I wonder if I might use your telephone, please?</i>
can could will would	to ask someone to do something for us less definite, more polite form of <i>can</i> less definite and more polite form of <i>will</i>	<i>Can you help me?</i> <i>Could you do me a favour?</i> <i>Will you switch on the light, please?</i> <i>The phone is ringing. Would you answer it? (=Would you mind answering it?)</i>
Offers: will, shall, can, could, would		
will shall can could	to say that we are willing to do sth to offer to do something =do you want me to? = 'ability' / = 'permission' less direct and more polite than <i>can</i>	<i>I'll help you with your suitcase.</i> <i>Are you hungry? I'll make you something to eat.</i> <i>Shall I open the door for you?</i> <i>I can post this letter for you. / Can I help you?</i> <i>I could lend you some money if you want.</i> <i>Could I carry that bag for you?</i>
would like would prefer would rather	to make polite offers and invitations	<i>Would you like me to help you?</i> <i>Would you prefer to stay in or go out?</i> <i>Would you rather go now?</i>
Suggestions: shall, can, could		
shall	to ask for and make suggestions	<i>Where shall we go? Shall we stay at home?</i>
can could	to suggest possible actions less direct and more polite than <i>can</i>	<i>We can watch TV if you like.</i> <i>We could go to the cinema tomorrow.</i>

FORM	MEANING / USE	EXAMPLES
Ability: can, could, be able to		
can	to talk about ability	<i>I can play the piano. (=am able to, know how to)</i>
be able to	<i>can</i> has no infinitive, <i>-ing</i> form or participles, so we use <i>be able to</i>	<i>I'd like to be able to play the piano. People will soon be able to live on other planets.</i>
could	someone had the general ability to do sth	<i>I could swim when I was four. (=was able to)</i>
was/were able to	to say that someone had the ability to do something <u>in a particular situation</u>	<i>I was tired but I was able to swim back. (not could) (=managed to/succeeded in: when it was difficult.)</i>
could	With verbs of perception (<i>see, hear, smell, taste, feel</i>) and verbs of thinking (<i>understand, remember</i>), we use <i>could</i> when we actually did these things in particular situations.	<i>We could see a man in the garden. She didn't speak very clearly, but I could understand what she said.</i>
could not	for both general ability and particular situations	<i>My grandmother couldn't speak German. He tried very hard, but he couldn't swim back.</i>
Possibility: can, could		
can	to talk about theoretical possibility	<i>Anyone can learn to swim. (=It's possible for anyone to learn to swim.)</i>
could	to talk about theoretical possibility in the past	<i>My brother could be really horrible as a child. (=My brother was sometimes horrible when he was...)</i>
Obligation and Necessity: must, have to, need		
must	The authority comes from the speaker.	<i>You must be home by 10 o'clock. I must go and see the doctor. (I think it is necessary.)</i>
mustn't	there is an obligation not to do sth	<i>You mustn't get up today. You've got a bad cold.</i>
have to	the authority comes from outside the speaker	<i>I have to be home by 10 o'clock. (My parents insist.) You have to drive on the left in Britain.</i>
don't have to	to say that it is not necessary to do something	<i>I don't have to / don't need to get up. I'm on holiday. I needn't (haven't got to) get up today.</i>
don't need to		
needn't	(haven't got to)	
didn't need to	past form of <i>don't need to</i> . It often means that someone didn't do something.	<i>I didn't need to unlock the door: it was unlocked. She didn't need to go out, but she went anyway.</i>
Deduction, Possibility and Probability: must, can't, should, ought to, may, might, could (saying how sure we are)		
+ must	to say that we are sure about something	<i>There's a light on. There must be someone in.</i>
can't -negative must	to say that sth is impossible - cf. <i>must</i>	<i>Annie can't be asleep. There's a light on in her room.</i>
should/ought to	sth is probable at the time of speaking	<i>Ann should be at work. She's normally there at 9.</i>
may (not)	to say that perhaps sth will happen in the future or that sth is true now	<i>It may be cold tomorrow. (=Perhaps it will be cold.) There's someone at the door. It may be Liz.</i>
might (not)	less sure than may. The interrogative is normally expressed by do you think? or be+likely to + infinitive.	<i>We might go to the beach tomorrow. Do you think he believes your story? Is the plane likely to be late?</i>
- could	less sure than might	<i>Simon could be in the living room.</i>
Modal Verbs + Perfect Infinitive (have + past participle)		
must + have + pp	used for deductions about the past	<i>The shoes you bought must have been expensive.</i>
can't + have + pp	used for deductions about the past	<i>He can't have been there! It was closed!</i>
should/ought to + have + p. participle	1) when we expected sth to happen - either we do not know if it happened or we know it didn't. 2) to say that someone did the wrong thing in the past	<i>They should have arrived. (But I don't know if they have.) They ought to have arrived, but they aren't there yet. I'm really tired. I shouldn't have stayed up so late. We had a good time. You ought to have come with us.</i>
needn't + have + p. participle	to say that someone did something unnecessarily	<i>I needn't have made so much food for the party. (=I shouldn't have made so much food for the party)</i>
may/might/could + have + p. participle	to talk about possibility in the past	<i>I think she may have been there. (=Perhaps she was... He might/could have lost it. (=Perhaps he has lost it.)</i>
could/might + have + p. participle	to say that something was possible in the past but <u>did not happen</u>	<i>You were very lucky. Someone could have stolen it. He was stupid to do that. He might have died.</i>