

# Modal Verbs

## What Are Modal Verbs?

Modal verbs are a type of helping verb. That means they work with a main verb to give more meaning to a sentence. They give more information about the action or situation. Here's an example of a sentence without a modal verb.

**You eat dinner.**

This means that you eat dinner regularly. You do it often.

Now, let's add some modal verbs and see how they change the meaning of the sentence.

**You should eat dinner.**

This is advice.

**You must eat.**

Now you need to eat.

**You can eat.**

Now you're allowed to eat.

**You could eat.**

Now it is possible for you to eat.

### The most common modal verbs

can	could	shall	should	
will	would	may	might	must

What do they mean?

**Can** permission / ability

Can is used to talk about things you are allowed to do, and things you are able to do.

- “You can have your powder. You can do your little experiment.”
- “Excuse me, Norm, but I think she can speak for herself.”

**Could** permission / possibility

Could is used for permission and things that are possible.

- “Mom said that we could each get one present.”
- “I just thought maybe we could hang out again.”

**Will** future

Will is used to talk about things that happen in the future.

- “I will sleep all the way through it.”

**Would** possibility / habit

Would Is for things that are unreal or unlikely to happen. It is also for things we used to do often, but we don't do anymore.

- “I would drive across the country for you.”
- “Any time Kai would bring it up, I would walk away.”

**Shall** suggestion

Shall is for suggestions, but only in a question.

- “So, shall we all hang out again sometime?”

Shall can also be used for the future, much like *will* or *am going to*. However, this is old-fashioned English and isn't often used these days.

**Should** advice / suggestion

Should is for advice or strong suggestions.

- “I think we should run away together, Till.”

**May** permission / possibility

May is used as a formal way to ask for permission. It is also used when something could happen.

- “May we have a moment of your time?”
- “You may want to check out Macy’s department store.”

**Might** possibility

Might is used when something could happen. It is more common to use than *may*.

- “If it’s alright, I thought I might take a short walk.”

**Must** obligation / possibility

Must is for talking about things we need to do, and for things that are very likely or almost certain.

- “Now you must go back to your friends.”
- “Your mother must think you’re a professional bowler by now.”

### Grammar Point

When you use modal verbs, there are four grammar points to remember.

#### Modals Don’t Change

Normally, we change the verb to agree with the subject.

**I eat. She eats.**

But with modal verbs, the modal stays the same.

**I might. She might.**

Modal verbs even stop the main verb from changing.

**I should eat. She should eat.**

### **Negative Sentences**

To make a modal verb negative, just add **not** after it.

**cannot / can't  
could not / couldn't  
may not**

**shall not / shan't  
should not / shouldn't  
might not**

**will not / won't  
would not / wouldn't  
must not / mustn't**

Be careful with the spelling for *cannot*. It is one word.

### **Questions**

To make a question, put the modal verb at the start.

**You can take me there. → Can you take me there?**

### **Modal Verbs Need a Main Verb**

Modal verbs are helping verbs. You must use a main verb in the same sentence. There is one exception; when you answer a question.

**Who can help me? → I can.**

We don't need the main verb here because it is implied. We know what the main verb is from the question.

## Test Your Knowledge

Now you know all about modal verbs, it's time to test what you have learned. Use the meaning to choose the correct word from the brackets, then place it in the sentence.

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ I leave the class early today? (permission: can, might, should)
- 2) She \_\_\_\_\_ swim very well when she was younger. (ability: can, could, will)
- 3) You \_\_\_\_\_ go to the doctor if you're feeling sick. (advice: will, should, might)
- 4) It looks like it \_\_\_\_\_ rain later, so take an umbrella. (possibility: would, might, should)
- 5) You \_\_\_\_\_ wear a seatbelt while driving. (obligation: could, must, would)
- 6) When I was a child, I \_\_\_\_\_ play every day. (past habit: would, should, could)
- 7) My parents said I \_\_\_\_\_ go to the party last weekend. (permission: can, could, must)
- 8) They \_\_\_\_\_ arrive at 3pm tomorrow. (future event: will, might, can)

Answers:

1. Can I leave the class early today?
2. She could swim very well when she was younger.
3. You should go to the doctor if you're feeling sick.
4. It looks like it might rain later, so take an umbrella.
5. You must wear a seatbelt while driving.
6. When I was a child, I would play every day.
7. My parents said I could go to the party last weekend.
8. They will arrive at 3pm tomorrow.

**Want to improve your English faster? Become a member!**

**Ad-free podcast episodes.**

Access to **The Podcast Course** for every episode.

**Conversation classes** with me and **quizzes** about my videos.

[Click here to join!](#)