

## Modal Verbs - Introduction

The exact meanings and uses of the English modals can be quite difficult for students to grasp. The differences are not always systematic or clear-cut and in many cases more than one modal can be used.

There are 10 core or central modals in English: *can, could, may, might, must, ought, shall, should, will, and would*. Other verbs, including *need, had better* and *dare*, may also function as modals (or semi-modals). There are also some expressions like *have to, have got to, be able to* which are not modal verbs but are closely related to them in meaning and are often interchanged with them.

**Modals 'help' other verbs to express a meaning:** it is important to realise that these verbs have no meaning by themselves. For example, a modal verb such as *would* has several varying functions; it can be used to help verbs express ideas about the past, the present and the future. It is therefore wrong to simply believe that "*would* is the past of *will*": it is many other things.

### A few basic grammatical rules applying to modal verbs:

- Modal verbs are NEVER used with other auxiliary verbs such as *do, does, did* etc. The negative is formed by adding "not" after the verb; questions are formed by inversion of the verb and subject: *You should not do that. - Could you pick me up when I've finished?*
- Modal verbs NEVER change form: you can never add an "-s" or "-ed".
- Modal verbs are NEVER followed by *to*, with the exception of *ought to*.
- Modal verbs do not have infinitives or participles and they do not normally have past forms (though *would, could, should* and *might* can sometimes be used as past tenses) Other expressions are used when necessary.

### What sort of meanings do modals give to other verbs?

The meanings are usually connected with ideas of **doubt, certainty, possibility and probability, obligation and permission (or lack of these)**. They are not used to talk about things that definitely exist, or events that definitely happened. These meanings are sometimes divided into two groups:

- **DEGREES OF CERTAINTY:** to express certainty; probability; possibility; impossibility.
  - 1) **complete certainty (positive or negative):** *Things will be all right - You must be tired - That can't be Bob. He is in Rome! - It will rain tomorrow*
  - 2) **Probability possibility:** *she should/ought to be here soon - We may be buying a new house*
  - 3) **weak probability:** *I might see you again - things might not be as bad as they seem*
  - 4) **Theoretical or habitual possibility:** *how many people can you get in a van? - It can be very warm in August*
  - 5) **Conditional certainty or possibility:** *if we had enough time, things would be easy - If I were you, I wouldn't do it - I couldn't do it without your help*
- **OBLIGATION/FREEDOM TO ACT AND SIMILAR IDEAS:** permission, lack of permission; ability; obligation; freedom to act; recommended behaviour; permission; willingness.

They are common in the polite expression of requests, suggestions, invitations and instructions.

  - 1) **Strong obligation:** *Students must register by 30 January - All staff will arrive for work by 8.30 a.m.*
  - 2) **Prohibition:** *You can't come in here! - Books may not be taken out of the library*
  - 3) **weak obligation, recommendation:** *You should see the doctor - What shall we do?*
  - 4) **Willingness, volunteering, resolving, insisting and offering:** *If you will come this way - I'll pay for the drinks! - Shall I give you a hand?*
  - 5) **Permission:** *Can I borrow your car? - May I use the phone?*
  - 6) **Absence of obligation:** *you needn't work tomorrow*
  - 7) **Ability:** *she can speak 6 languages*

Note that **obligation, permission** etc. are usually seen from the *speaker's point of view in statements*, and from the *hearer's in questions*. Compare:

*You must go and see Anna. (I think it is necessary.) - Must you go and see Anna? (Do you think it is necessary?)*  
*You can borrow my car (I give permission) - Can I borrow your car (will you give permission?)*

### Other meanings:

#### Habitual behaviour:

We can talk about what people and things typically or habitually do or did, using *can, may, will, would* and *used to*.

*Dan can really get on your nerves. - Most evenings he'll just sit watching TV. -*

*A female crocodile may lay 30-40 eggs. - I used to play a lot of tennis.*

*When we were small my mother would take us out on bikes every Sunday*

## PRONUNCIATION AND CONTRACTION

Several modals have *weak pronunciations*, used when they are not stressed

*Strong pronunciation* is required when you want to stress the modal verb for questions and for effect or emphasis.

In everyday speech we usually use a weakened form of pronunciation for modal verbs. This means we pronounce the modal verb softly, fast and with a reduced or non-existent vowel sound. At best the vowel is reduced to a *schwa* sound (ə) but it can often be omitted entirely

**shall** (ʃæl; unstressed ʃəl)

**shan't** (ʃɑ:nt) Negative contractions have a strong pronunciation. There is no weak form of *shan't*,

**should** (ʃʊd; unstressed ʃəd),

**shouldn't** (ˈʃʊdn̩t),

**will** (wɪl)

**won't** (wəʊnt)

**would** (wʊd; unstressed wəd)

**wouldn't** (ˈwʊdənt)

**can** (kæn; unstressed kən),

**can't** kɑ:nt                    **cannot** ˈkænɒt

**could** (kʊd; unstressed kəd)

**couldn't** (ˈkʊdənt)

**may** (meɪ)

**mayn't** (ˈmeɪ ənt, meɪnt)

**might** (maɪt)

**mightn't** (ˈmaɪt nt)

**must** (mʌst; unstressed məst; məs)

**mustn't** (ˈmʌsənt)

**ought to** is generally pronounced /ˈɔ:t tə/

**have to** is generally pronounced /ˈhæf tə/.