

MAY – MIGHT – CAN – COULD – COULD HAVE – MIGHT HAVE

MAY	Future possibility/hypothesis • Negative possibility • Polite request (formal) • Permission (formal) • Prohibition	It may rain tomorrow. He may not arrive tonight. May I call you later? You may take the car. You may not smoke in the library.
MIGHT	Remote Possibility • Very polite request	It might rain tomorrow/ It may not rain tomorrow - Might I use your phone?
MAY / MIGHT / COULD + HAVE + past participle	When we are not sure because we do not actually know what happened in the past	Paul is late for work. He may have missed the bus. He might have left his house late.
COULD HAVE + past participle	• When we had the ability to do something in the past but we didn't do it	I could have gone to the party but I didn't want to.

We use *may*, *might* and *could* to say that something is **possible**, but not certain:

*They **may come** by car.* (= Maybe they will come by car.)

*They **might be** at home.* (= Maybe they are at home.)

*If we don't hurry, we **could be** late.* (= Maybe we will be late.)

Notice the difference in meaning between *can* and *may/might/could*:

*That dog **can be** dangerous.* = Sometimes that dog is dangerous. I know.

*That dog **may/might/could be** dangerous.* = Perhaps that dog is dangerous. I don't know.

1. POSSIBILITY

When we say that something is possible we mean:

1) **something can be done (theoretically):** *It is possible to hold one's breath for 3 minutes, with practice*

2) **the chance** of something actually happening – *'Do you think you'll come back?' 'It is quite possible.'*

CAN is used for the first kind of possibility (theoretical) – *Accidents **can** happen*

COULD is used for the first kind of possibility in the **past**: *my aunt **could be** very unpleasant at times*

COULD – MAY - MIGHT are used for the second kind of possibility (there is a **chance** of something happening) *according to the radio it **could/may/might** rain this evening*

CAN'T – when we feel sure something is not possible: *You **can't be** hungry, you have just finished eating! (you must be full!)*

2. PERMISSION

Can – could – may - might (when asking for permission, they all refer to a situation in the future)

Asking for permission:

Can is the commonest: ***Can I** go to the loo?*

Could (a bit less sure than can): ***Could I** ask you something?*

May/might more formal: ***May I** get up?*

May (but not might) is also used to give permission: *Yes, of course you **may!***

When **giving permission** use *can* or *may* (formal): ***Could I** use the phone? Of course you **can/may***

May not is used to **refuse** or **forbid** (**May not and must not**, when used to forbid, often have a similar meaning – **must not** is more emphatic): *Visitors **may not/must not** feed the animals*

CAN/COULD HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

When **speculating or guessing** about the past: *It's Saturday she **can't have gone** to school*

When talking about an **unrealized past possibility** (something that was possible but did not happen): *Why did you do that? You **could have broken** your neck (But you did not)*

When **criticizing** people for not doing things: *You **could have told** me that!*

MAY/MIGHT HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

When making guesses about the past:

*I haven't received your letter. It **may have got lost** in the post.*

*It's ten o'clock. They **might have arrived** by now.*