

Functions of Modal Verbs

Modal Verbs

The **modal verbs** are: can, could, must, will, would, shall, should, may, might, ought (to), etc. They have the same form in all persons. They come before the subject in questions and take not after them in negations. They take an infinitive without to after them except for ought which is followed by a to infinitive.

*Can she play tennis? No, she **can't** play tennis but she **can** play golf.
He **ought to** listen to you.*

We express **ability** with:

- **can** (ability in the present or future)

Can you swim?

*No, I **can't**. I **can** run fast though.*

- **could / was able to** (ability in the past for repeated actions)

*She **could / was able to** dance for hours when she was young. (repeated action)*

- **was able to** (= managed to) (ability in the past for repeated actions or a single action)

*He **was able to** win the race. (single action) (NOT ~~He could win the race.~~)*

BUT: *I **couldn't / wasn't able to** find my keys. (single action)*

*He **couldn't / wasn't able to** ski when he was young. (repeated action)*

Can is the Present Simple form and **could** is the Past Simple. **Can** borrows the rest of its tenses from the verb phrase **be able to**. *She **hasn't been able to** finish it yet.*



1. Fill in: can / can't, could / couldn't, was / wasn't able to or have been able to.

1 A: I'd like to speak to Mr Green, please.

B: I'm sorry but Mr Green **can't** come to the phone right now. He's busy.

2 A: I ride a bicycle until I was ten.

B: Well, I didn't learn until I was thirteen.

3 A: How was the test, Lucy?

B: It was difficult but I answer all the questions.

4 A: Is Larry good at languages?

B: Yes, he already speak French, German and Spanish.

5 A: Nick was a very talented child.

B: I know. He play the piano when he was seven.

6 A: you swim, Sophie?

B: Of course. I swim since I was five.

We express **possibility / probability** with:

- **may / might** + present infinitive

*He **may** be back before noon. (It's possible.)*

*There **might** be some cheese in the fridge. (It's possible.)*

*He **could** still be at home. (It's possible.)*

- **could** + present infinitive

- **must** + present infinitive

*They look alike. They **must** be twins. (I think they are twins.)*

- **can't** + present infinitive

*You have been sleeping all day. You **can't** be tired. (I don't think it's possible that you are tired.)*

- **Can ... ?** + present infinitive

***Can** he still be at work? (Is it possible?)*

- **could / might** + perfect infinitive

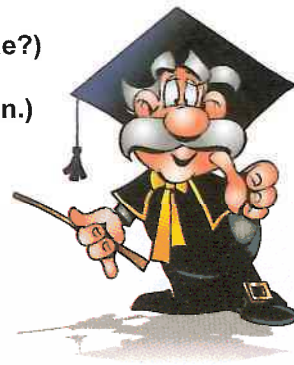
*We **could** have had an accident.*

(It was possible but it didn't happen.)

- **Might** is the past form of may. **Might** can also be used for present situations, too.



*There's a lot of traffic. We **might** be a little late for the school.*



asking for permission

- **can** (informal)
Can I borrow your pen?
- **could** (more polite)
Could I borrow your car?
- **may** (formal)
May I use your phone?
- **might** (more formal)
Might I see your driving licence, please?



Mr Brown: *May I see Mr Parson?*
Secretary: *I'm sorry, you can't see him. He's busy at the moment.*

giving / refusing permission

- **can** (informal, giving permission)
You can have one more if you want.
- **may** (formal, giving permission)
You may stay a little longer.
- **mustn't** (refusing permission)
You mustn't park here.
- **can't** (refusing permission)
You can't enter this room.



Policeman: *You mustn't park here.*

2. Fill in: can, may, could, mustn't or can't.

Simon : Mum, ¹....*Can*..... I go to the library?

Mother: Of course you ²..... Simon but you ³..... stay very long.

Simon : ⁴..... I stay until 8 o'clock?

Mother: No, you ⁵..... because we're leaving for the cinema at 8:30.

(At the library)

Simon : ⁶..... I look at the latest issue of Musician magazine, please?

Librarian: Yes, you ⁷..... but remember that you ⁸..... take it out of the library.

We make requests, offers or suggestions with:

- **can** (request) *Can you help me tidy my room?*
- **could / would** (polite request) *Could / Would you help me with my homework?*
- **could** (suggestion) *Could we go shopping today?*
- **would you like** (polite offer) *Would you like some more lemonade?*
- **Shall I / we** (suggestion/offer) *Shall I post this letter for you? (offer)*
- **Shall we** buy him a present? (suggestion) *Shall we buy him a present? (suggestion)*
- **will** (offer/request) *I'll make you some coffee if you want. (friendly offer)*
- for the other uses of 'will' *Will you do me a favour? (friendly request)*
- (promises, threats, etc.)

3. Fill in: can, could, would, shall or will.

John: ¹....*Would*..... you like some more juice, Jane?

Jane: No, thank you. ²..... we get the bill?

John: OK. Waiter - excuse me, ³..... you bring us the bill, please?

Waiter: Here you are sir. ⁴..... I take these plates away?

John: Yes, please. ⁵..... I have a pen to sign this cheque, please?

Jane, ⁶..... you give me my keys?

Waiter: ⁷..... you like me to get a taxi for you, sir?

John: Yes. Thank you.

Waiter: And I ⁸..... bring your coats for you in just a minute.



4. Fill in: will, shall or won't.

Mum : 1...*Will*... you be late home tonight, Sue?

Sue : Yes, I 2..... I'm going to a party. But I 3..... be too late. I have school tomorrow.

Mum : 4..... I keep some dinner for you?

Sue : No thanks, Mum. There 5..... be lots to eat at the party.

Mum : 6..... I pick you up after the party?

Sue : No, there's no need. I 7..... come home with Kim and her parents.

Mum : Well, I 8..... wait up for you.

Sue : No, Mum. Please don't. Oh no! Look at the time! What 9..... I wear?

We express **advice** with:

- **should / ought to**
- **had better**

You *should* walk more. (general advice; I advise you.)

You'd *better* see your dentist.

(advice for a specific situation; it is a good idea.)

We express **criticism** with:

- **should / ought to + perfect infinitive** = *It would have been better if you had ...*

You *ought to have been* more polite to him.

(It was the right thing to do but you didn't do it.)

5. Fill in: don't have to, may, can't, should, shall or must.



1 You *should* see a dentist.



2 You be quiet.



3 I don't believe it. It be true.



4 They wear a uniform at school.



5 I do the washing-up?



6 I leave the room, please?

We express **obligation** or **necessity** with:

- **must** (strong obligation, duty or personal feelings of necessity)

You *must* stop when the traffic light is red.

I *must* see a doctor soon. (I decide it's necessary.)

- **have to** (obligation or external necessity)

I *have to* do my homework every day. (the teachers decide it is necessary - not me)

- **I've got to** (informal; it's necessary) *I've got to* leave early today.

Must is the Present Simple form. It borrows the rest of its tenses from the verb **have to**. To form questions and negations of **have to** we use **do/does** (Present Simple) and **did** (Past Simple).

He *didn't have to* do the shopping yesterday.

You *don't have to* go to school today.

Does he *have to* be at work on time?



6. Choose the correct item.

- 1 you play the guitar?
 a) Can b) May c) Must
- 2 They live in a huge house and own three cars. They be rich.
 a) can't b) can c) must
- 3 I help you carry these bags?
 a) Will b) Shall c) Would you like
- 4 You water the plants. I've already watered them.
 a) can't b) don't need c) needn't
- 5 He had studied hard, so he answer all the questions in the test.
 a) is able to b) was able to c) can
- 6 You be rude to your parents.
 a) mustn't b) must c) couldn't
- 7 You to eat more fruit and vegetables if you want to stay healthy.
 a) should b) had better c) ought
- 8 Sam be at work today. It's Sunday.
 a) can't b) mustn't c) must
- 9 I read or write when I was four years old.
 a) wasn't able b) couldn't c) can't
- 10 We to be at the office at 9 o'clock every morning.
 a) should b) must c) have

We express **absence of necessity** or **prohibition** with:

- **mustn't** (prohibition) *You **mustn't** feed the animals in the zoo. (It's forbidden.)*
- **can't** (prohibition) *You **can't** enter the country club without a card. (You are not allowed.)*
- **needn't** (it is not necessary) *You **needn't** take an umbrella. It isn't raining.*
- **don't need to / don't have to** (it is not necessary in the present / future) *You **don't need to / don't have to** do it now. You can do it later. (It isn't necessary.)*
- **didn't need to / didn't have to** (it was not necessary in the past) *He **didn't need to / didn't have to** go to work yesterday because it was Sunday. (It was not necessary.)*

7. Circle the correct item.

- 1 How long will you **have to** / **must** stay in the hospital?
- 2 You **have to** / **must** always obey the school rules.
- 3 I'm so tired. I **must** / **have to** take a break.
- 4 My mum says I **must** / **have to** clean my room today.
- 5 It's cold out. I **must** / **have to** wear my warm coat.
- 6 Sam usually **has to** / **must** take the rubbish out in the morning.
- 7 I **must** / **have to** work from Monday to Friday.
- 8 Do you **have to** / **must** wear a uniform at school?

8. Match the signs to the sentences.

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | b | You mustn't talk here. |
| 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | | You can eat and sleep here. |
| 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | | You can't drive here. |
| 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | | You must pay in cash. |
| 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | | You shouldn't drop litter. |
| 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> | | You should walk here. |

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| a | BED AND BREAKFAST |
| b | SILENCE |
| c | PLEASE PUT LITTER IN THE BIN |
| d | NO CHEQUES OR CREDIT CARDS |
| e | PLEASE STAY ON PATH |
| f | ROAD UNDER CONSTRUCTION |

9. Fill in the gaps with **mustn't, **needn't**, **don't need to / don't have to** or **didn't need to / didn't have to**.**

- 1 **A:** Did Robert get a taxi to the airport?
B: No, he *didn't need to / didn't have to* . Dad gave him a lift.
- 2 **A:** You buy that book. I can lend you mine.
B: Thanks a lot, Ann.
- 3 **A:** You tell anyone what happened!
B: Don't worry. I won't say a word.
- 4 **A:** You be late for the meeting.
B: Yes, I know. I have to leave early to get there on time.
- 5 **A:** Shall I do the ironing for you?
B: No, you I'll do it later.
- 6 **A:** You forget to post the invitations.
B: OK. I'll post them on my way to work.