

English Modal Verbs PDF Lesson



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Modal verbs are auxiliary verbs that express ability, permission, obligation, advice, possibility, and other attitudes toward an action. They are always followed by the base form of the verb (without "to") and do not change form. Think of them as a camera lens — same situation, different modal, completely different meaning. A doctor can say "You may leave" (permission), "You should rest" (advice), "You must take this medication" (obligation), or "You might feel better tomorrow" (possibility). Same patient, same room, four different meanings.

Doctor Scenario	What the Doctor Says	What It Means
Permission	You may leave now.	You are allowed to — it is your choice.
Advice	You should get more rest.	I recommend this for your wellbeing.
Obligation	You must take this medication twice a day.	This is not optional — it is necessary.
Possibility	You might feel better by Friday.	It is possible but not guaranteed.
Ability	You can walk without the crutches now.	You have the physical ability to do this.
Prohibition	You must not eat before the surgery.	This is forbidden — do not do it.
Expectation	You should be feeling better within a week.	Based on my knowledge, I expect this.

Can / Could	Meaning	Example
can — present ability	She can speak three languages.	Can I use your phone? (permission)
could — past ability	He could run fast as a child.	Could you help me? (polite request)
could — possibility	That could be the answer.	It could rain later.

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May / Might	Meaning	Example
may — formal permission	May I come in?	You may leave when ready.
may — possibility (~50%)	It may rain this afternoon.	She may join us later.
might — less certain	I might go to the party.	It might be a good idea.
might — polite suggestion	You might want to reconsider.	You might try a different approach.

Must / Should / Shall	Meaning	Example
must — strong obligation	You must wear a seatbelt.	You must submit this today.
must — logical deduction	She must be tired.	He must be at home.
must not — prohibition	You must not smoke here.	You must not park here.
should — advice	You should see a doctor.	You should call him back.
should — expectation	It should arrive tomorrow.	She should be here by now.
shall — offer (British)	Shall I open the window?	Shall we begin?

Will / Would	Meaning	Example
will — future / prediction	It will be ready by Friday.	It will rain tomorrow.
will — instant decision	I'll have the pasta, please.	I'll call you back.
would — polite request	Would you mind closing the door?	Would you help me?
would — hypothetical	I would travel more if I had time.	I would call but I'm busy.
would — past habit	We would visit grandparents every summer.	He would always arrive early.

Obligation — Must vs Have to vs Should	Modal	Example
must — strong internal obligation	I must call my mother today.	I feel strongly I need to do this.
have to — external obligation	I have to wear a uniform at work.	The rules require this.
should — mild advice	You should drink more water.	A recommendation, not a rule.
must not — prohibition	You must not park here.	This is not allowed.
don't have to — no obligation	You don't have to come.	It is not necessary but you can.

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Certainty Scale	Modal	Example
must — almost certain	He must be home — the lights are on.	Positive deduction.
should — fairly certain	The train should be here by now.	Expected but not guaranteed.
may — possible (~50%)	She may join us later.	Equal chance either way.
might / could — less certain	It might snow. / It could be true.	Possible but unlikely.
can't / couldn't — near impossible	That can't be right.	Negative deduction.

Common Mistakes	Correct	Incorrect
No "to" after modal	You should call him.	You should to call him.
No "-ing" after modal	She must finish the report.	She must finishing the report.
Must not vs Don't have to	You don't have to come. (not required)	You must not come. (prohibited)
Could vs Was able to	She was able to escape. (single event)	She could escape. (implies habit)
Would vs Used to	I used to live in Paris.	I would live in Paris. (wrong for states)
May vs Can	May I leave? (formal)	Can I leave? (informal only)

EXAMPLES

- ABILITY: I can swim but I can't drive. / When I was young I could climb trees easily.
- PERMISSION: Can I borrow your pen? / May I ask you a question? (more formal)
- OBLIGATION: You must submit the form by Friday. / You have to show your ID at the door.
- ADVICE: You should get more sleep. / You ought to see a specialist about that.
- POSSIBILITY: It might be a good idea to leave early. / There may be delays on the road.
- DEDUCTION: She must be the new manager — everyone is listening. / That can't be right.
- POLITE REQUEST: Could you pass the salt? / Would you mind waiting a moment?
- HYPOTHETICAL: If I had more time, I would learn to play the piano.