

Modals

a summary

The nine main modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must*. There are other auxiliary verbs - *ought to, used to, need, have to* - which are used in a similar way.

Use

Modals are auxiliary verbs which combine with the main verb to express a range of meanings such as possibility, obligation, necessity, ability.

They are never about facts, but about the speaker's or listener's opinion at the time of speaking.

Form and meaning

You don't use **to** after a modal verb except with *ought to, have to* and *used to*.

Modals do not use 3rd person -s forms, -ing forms or -ed endings.

A past form of modals is used to analyse and speculate about past events.

The auxiliary verb **have** is added to the modal verb.

Subject	Modal Verb (Positive or negative)		Main verb
I They It He She	Might Might not		Think
Past tense			
Subject	Modal Verb (Positive or negative)	Have	Main verb
I They It He She	Might Might not	Have	Thought

Modals and examples

Modal	Past	Negative	Function	Example
<i>Can</i>	Could	Cannot/can't Couldn't	Ability, permission, possibility, request, offer	I can eat He can't eat now He could eat a lot when he was young They couldn't eat alone We could study now I couldn't study last night
<i>Could</i>	Could	Couldn't		
<i>May</i>	May (have)	May not Might not	Possibility, permission, desire or wish, speculation	It may snow today It might not snow today She may have been caught in the snow this morning
<i>Might</i>	Might (have)	Might not		
<i>Shall</i>	should	Shan't (rarely used)	Offers Suggestions	Shall we book a trip to Tokyo? Shall I order lunch for us?
<i>Should</i>	Should	Shouldn't	Asking for Giving advice	What do you think I should do? Should we walk? You should take more breaks.
<i>Will</i>	Would	Won't (will not) Wouldn't	Requests Offers Future possibility refusals	Will it be sunny today? I won't go with her
<i>Would</i>	Would	Wouldn't	Requests Advice Speculation	Would you go to the shop for me? I wouldn't if I were you What would you do
<i>Must</i>	Had to	Didn't have to	Obligation Deduction	You must wear a uniform for this job He had to work late I didn't have to, but I did
<i>Ought to</i>	Ought to (have)	Ought not to	Obligation (moral)	You ought to discuss it with him
<i>Need to</i>	Needed to Didn't need to	Needn't Don't need to	necessity	I needed to relax You needn't send a gift You don't need to send a gift
<i>Have to</i>	Had to	Don't have to Didn't have to	Obligation (external authority)	I had to turn the heating off I don't have to go to college today I didn't have to go to the wedding, but I did.