

Modal Auxiliaries

1. Forms

positive		negative	
can	-	cannot	can't [kɑ:nt]
could	-	could not	couldn't
will	'll	will not	won't [wəʊnt]
would	'd	would not	wouldn't
must	-	must not	mustn't [mʌsnt]
may	-	may not	-
might	-	might not	mightn't
shall	'll	shall not	shan't [ʃɑ:nt]
should	'd	should not	shouldn't
ought to	-	ought not to	oughtn't to
-	-	need not	needn't

2. Characteristics

After a modal auxiliary we use an infinitive without *to* (exception: *ought to*):

I can ride a motorbike.

There is one form for all persons (no *-s* in the 3rd person singular!):

She can speak Russian.

Negatives/Questions are formed without *do/does/did*:

Can you sing?

Modal auxiliaries have no infinitive form, *-ing* form or past participle form. This is why some modals have a substitute form to form the infinitive, *-ing* form and compound tenses:

She hates having to get up early.

I haven't been able to contact Jenny.

3. Ability: *can / could / be able to*

Can and *could* express a **general ability**.

When talking about a **specific situation** in the past we use *was/were able to*.

Note the difference:

We can always use *could/couldn't* in **questions and negative statements**.

With **verbs of perception** (*see, hear, etc.*) we only use *can/could*, not *was/were able to*.

In **compound tenses**, e.g. the present perfect or the *will*-future, we use *be able to*.

*Most teenagers **can** use a computer.*

*I **could** ride a horse when I was ten.*

*The road was icy, but Jane **was able to** stop the car.*

*The little girl fell in the river. Luckily, she **could** swim (=general ability), so she **was able to** reach the river bank and pull herself out. (=ability in a specific situation)*

***Could** you speak French fluently after your year in Paris?*

*I **could** hear you, but you **couldn't** see you.*

***Have you been able to** contact Jane since she moved?*

4. Permission: *can / may / could / be allowed to*

The past forms *could* and *was/were allowed to* express a **general permission** in the past.

*On Saturdays we **could** always stay up till midnight.*

For permission in a **specific situation** in the past we use only *was/were allowed to*.

*Yesterday Julie **was allowed to** stay up till midnight.*

In the present tense *can* and *can't* is used when **the speaker is giving or refusing permission**.

*You **can** use my camera.*

Be (not) allowed is used when we mean that **someone else is giving or refusing permission**.

*You **aren't allowed to** smoke on the plane, I'm afraid.*

To **ask for permission**, we can use *Can I/we...?*, *Could I/we...?* or *May I/we...?* (*May I/we...?* is especially polite.).

***May I** leave half an hour earlier, please?*

Mustn't is used either to **prohibit** something on the authority of the speaker, or for a general rule which prohibits something.

*You **mustn't** pull the cat's tail.*

5. Obligation and Necessity: *must / have (got) to / needn't / not have (got) to*

Must is used when the necessity or obligation is **felt by the speaker**.

*I'm exhausted. I **must** sit down.*

Must is also used in **official regulations**.

*Dogs **must** be kept on leads.*

Have to is used mostly to talk about necessity which is **imposed by someone else**. It often arises from the situation.

*Sorry, I **have (got) to** go now. The taxi is waiting.*

Note the difference:

*Doctor to Ally: "You **must** take this medicine twice a day."*

*Ally to mother: "I **have (got) to** take this medicine twice a day."*

The past tense of *must* and *have (got) to* is *had to*.

*Yesterday we **had to** get up early.*

Compound tenses, e.g. the present perfect or the *will*-future, are formed with *have to*.

*We've never **had to** play against such a good team.*

We use *needn't* to express a **lack of necessity**.

*You **needn't** tell Dan about the party. He knows.*

We use *mustn't* to express a **prohibition**.

*You **mustn't** tell Dan about the party. It's a surprise.*

Note: *Need* can be a modal auxiliary or a full verb.

*You **needn't** go now.*

*You **don't need to** go now.*

6. Obligation, instructions and advice: *should / ought to / had better / be to / supposed to and must*

We use *should* and *ought to* to express an **obligation** or to give **advice**.

*If you make a promise, you **should / ought to** keep it.*

We use *should/ought to + perfect infinitive* to talk about a **past obligation** which was not met.

*You **shouldn't have drunk** so much.*

There are other ways of expressing advice and obligation:

Had better is used when we give **advice** and expect it to be taken. Note that after *had better* the infinitive is without *to*.

*It's raining. You **had better** take an umbrella.*

We use *be to* to report other people's **instructions**, or to ask about them.

*Mum says you're **to be** back before ten.*

We use *be supposed to* to say that someone should do something because they have an **obligation** to do it or have **agreed** to do it.

*You're **supposed to** answer all the questions on the form.*

We use *must* to **strongly advise** or **recommend** something. We often use *simply* or *really* for emphasis.

*You **simply must** see the exhibition.*

7. Requests: *Can/Could you...?* and *Will/Would you...?*

We use *Can/Could you...?* and *Will/Would...you?* to make a request. *Could you...?* and *Would...you?* are more polite.

Can you turn down the music, please?
Would you help me to carry these bags?

8. Offers and invitations: *Can/Could I...?* / *Will / Won't you...?* / *Would/Wouldn't you...?* and *May I/we...?*

When we want to **offer** somebody something or **invite** somebody to do something, we can use *Can/Could I...?* / *Will / Won't you...?* / *Would/Wouldn't you...?* and *May I/we...?*

We use *May I/we...?* for a very polite offer.

Could I get you a drink?
Would you like some more cake?

May we send you our catalogue?

9. Suggestions: *Shall I/we...?* / *Can't/Couldn't we...?* / *can and could*

Shall I/we...? / *Can't/Couldn't we...?* / *can* and *could* are used to make **suggestions**.

Shall we buy a DVD-player?
Couldn't we go to town tomorrow?

10. Refusals and rejections: *won't* and *wouldn't*

Won't expresses a **refusal in the present**.

Wouldn't expresses a **refusal in the past**.

*My mother knows I love dogs, but she **won't** let us have one.*

*Paul knew the secret, but he **wouldn't** tell me.*

11. Possibility and probability: *can / could / will / would / must / may / might / should and ought to*

By using certain modal auxiliaries, the speaker can express an assumption about how **certain**, **probable** or **possible** he thinks something is.

fairly certain

must	cannot	<i>The lights are on. Craig must be at home.</i>
will	will not	

probable

would	would not	<i>Too bad Sam is injured. With him in the team they would win. That parcel could be a birthday present.</i>
ought to	ought not to	
should	should not	
could	could not	

possible

may	may not	<i>Steve hasn't phoned yet. He may still be in bed. The weather can be quite nice in England.</i>
might	might not	
can	cannot	

12. Typical behaviour: *will and would*

Will can express **typical behaviour in the present**.

Granny will sit in the park and feed the birds all day.

Would can express **typical behaviour in the past**.

When I was a child, I would play in the fields every day.