MAY – MIGHT – AUGHT TO - SHOULD

May: uses

Permission

We use *may* to ask for, give and refuse permission. It is quite formal.

asking for permission	giving permission	refusing permission
May I leave the room?	Yes, you **may**.	No, you **may** not.
May we use your phone?	Yes, you **may**.	No, you **may** not.

Affirmative (+) form

May comes first in the verb phrase (after the subject and before another verb):

It **may** be possible for him to get home tonight.

May can't be used with another modal verb:

This **may** hurt you.

Not: ~~This may could hurt you~~. or ~~This could may hurt you~~.

Negative (−) form

The negative form of *may* is *may not*. We don't use *don't/doesn't/didn't* with *may*:

We **may not** have enough information at the moment.

Not: ~~We don't may have enough information at the moment~~.

Possibility

We use *may* to refer to weak possibility in the present and future:

*The economy **may** go up or down in the next year.* (I think both are possible, the economy going up or the economy going down. I am not making either one a strong possibility.)

*I think I **may** go to the doctor today and try to get some antibiotics.* (I am not very sure yet if I will go to the doctor.)

General truths

We use *may* in formal writing, especially academic English, to describe things which the speaker thinks are generally true or possible. In this case, it is a more formal equivalent of *can*.

Accepting a different view or opinion

We often use *may* to accept a different view or opinion, especially with *well*, and/or followed by *but*:

*One month **may** well be too long to go away on holiday.*

*I **may** be wrong but I am going to tell the police about it.*

*The couch **may** well cost more but it's going to be different.*

Might: uses

Possibility

We use *might* most often to refer to weak possibility:

*I **might** go to Japan for a month to study Japanese.*

*The dog **might** bark when we pass by the gate.*

*They **might** not like very hot food.*

Permission

We use *might* to refer to permission. It is very formal and is not used very often:

***Might** I ask your name?*

***Might** I interrupt you for a moment?*

Suggestions

We can use *might* to give advice or make a suggestion sound more polite or less direct, especially when used together with *like, prefer* or *want*:

[A waiter politely suggesting a dessert to a customer.]

You **might** like to try one of our wonderful desserts.

Criticism

We often use *might have + -ed* form to express disapproval or criticism:

You **might have told** me you weren't coming home for dinner. (you didn't tell me)

You **might have tidied** your room.

Might: reporting *may*

We use *might* as the past form of *may* in indirect reports:

'That **may** not be true', she said.

She said that it **might** not be true.

Might: typical error

- We don't use *might* for ability; we use *can* or *could*:

Although you **can** visit these places, if you are tired, you're welcome to stay in the hotel.

Not: Although you might visit these places …

I **could hear the noise of an engine.**

Not: I might hear the noise of an engine.

Should: uses

What is ideal or desired

We use *should* most commonly to talk about what is the ideal or best thing to do in a situation:

There **should** be more public hospitals.

They **should** reduce the price of petrol. It's so expensive.

There **should** be four more candles on the cake.

We use *should have + -ed* form to talk about things that were ideal in the past but which didn't happen. It can express regret:

Everyone knows that this is a busy restaurant. They **should have made** a reservation.

I **should have studied** harder when I was young. I wish I had gone to college.

Advice and suggestions

We often use *should* to give advice and make suggestions:

You **should** tell him what you think.

We **should** leave it until tomorrow; it's late now.

What is likely to happen

We also use *should* to talk about what is likely to happen:

Shall we start? Luke's delayed but he says he **should** be here in ten minutes.

Thanking

Spoken English:

In speaking, we often say *you shouldn't have* when someone gives us a gift:

A: *I got you something from Texas. A cowboy hat.*

B: *Oh Ken, you **shouldn't have**!*

Surprise or regret

We sometimes use *should* to express surprise or regret about something that happened:

I'm amazed that he **should** have done something so stupid.

I'm sorry that he **should** be so upset by what I said.

Ought to is a semi-modal verb because it is in some ways like a modal verb and in some ways like a main verb. For example, unlike modal verbs, it is followed by *to*, but like modal verbs, it does not change form for person:

I **ought to** *phone my parents.*

It **ought to** *be easy now.*

Ought to: form

Affirmative

Ought to comes first in the verb phrase (after the subject and before another verb):

We **ought to** *do more exercise.*

Ought to cannot be used with another modal verb:

Medicine **ought to** *be free.*

Not: ~~Medicine ought to can be free.~~ or ~~Medicine can ought to be free.~~

Ought to: uses

What is desired or ideal

We use *ought to* when talking about things which are desired or ideal:

They **ought to** *have more parks in the city centre.*

We **ought to** *eat lots of fruit and vegetables every day.*

We use *ought to have + -ed* form to talk about things that were desired or ideal in the past but which didn't happen. It can express regret:

We **ought to have locked** *the gate. Then the dog wouldn't have got out.* (The ideal or desired thing was that we locked the gate, but we didn't.)

I often think that I **ought to have studied** *medicine not pharmacy.* (I would be happier now if I had studied medicine.)

What is likely

We can use *ought to* when we talk about what is likely or probable:

*The concert **ought to** only take about two hours so we'll be home by 12 pm.*

*There **ought to** be some good films at the cinema this weekend.*

Ought to or *should*?

Ought to and *should* are similar in meaning. *Should* is more common than *ought to*. *Ought to* is more formal than *should*:

*There **ought to** be more street lights here. (means the same as There **should** be more street lights here.)*

*I really **ought to walk my dog more. He's so fat.** (means the same as I really **should** walk my dog more. He's so fat.)*

ACTIVITIES

May / might

Exercises: modal verbs

CLICK HERE TO GO TO
THE ACTIVITY

May / might

Test: modal verbs.

CLICK HERE TO GO TO
THE ACTIVITY

Quiz: Modals- Meaning

CLICK HERE TO GO TO
THE ACTIVITY

Quiz: May or Might

CLICK HERE TO GO TO
THE ACTIVITY

Should or ought to

CLICK HERE TO GO TO
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