

Modals of Advice

Common modals of advice in English are *should*, *ought to*, and *had better*. Read on for the differences in meaning and usage!

Should

Using the modal of advice *should* is the most common way to suggest something to someone in English. The pattern is **should + base verb**. The negative form, *should not*, often gets contracted to *shouldn't*.

- You **should tell** your boss about the report.
- They **should start** getting ready to go because the bus leaves at 4:00.
- She **shouldn't smoke** outside because people are eating on the patio nearby.

Ought To

Ought to is a modal expression that sounds a bit stuffy these days. I always tell my students that though they may occasionally see it in textbooks or in writing, they should avoid using **ought to + base verb** themselves because it's pretty old-fashioned. Some people would argue that *ought to* is a bit stronger of a suggestion than *should*, but I'd argue that the difference isn't important, especially since it's not commonly used nowadays.

As a general overview (in case students come across it), you may want to mention that in spoken English, *ought to* is usually shortened to /aw-da/, and that the negative expression *ought not to* is even less common and best avoided altogether.

- You **ought to** show your report card to your parents.

Had Better

Use **had better + base verb** to make a stronger suggestion than *should*. This modal of advice is used when someone thinks the other person really should follow the suggestion, implying that there will be more serious consequences if the advice isn't taken.

Had better is a modal expression that is often contracted to *'d better*. The negative form, *had better not*, is also often contracted to *'d better not*.

- We **had better let** someone know about the problem.
- He'd **better study** for the test because he's failing the class.
- I'd **better not eat** another cookie because I'm on a diet.

Modals of Necessity

The modals of necessity/obligation *must*, *have to*, and *have got to* have essentially the same meaning and are all used to denote a strong suggestion.

Must

Must + base verb is a little more formal and is often used in written English (e.g., this modal would appear on a sign listing out rules). The negative form is *must not*. While the contraction *mustn't* is possible, it isn't commonly used nowadays and has a stuffy feel to it. I tell my students to avoid it.

Don't forget to remind students that *can't/cannot* is a modal with basically the same meaning as *must not*, with *can't/cannot* being a bit more common.

- You **must remove** your jacket and shoes when going through airport security.
- We **must register** for the conference before we can attend any sessions.
- You **must not/can't** use a pen. All answers **must be written** with a pencil.

Have To

Have to + base verb is a little more informal and is often used in spoken English and informal writing. Note that this is one modal expression that does have subject-verb agreement. Third person singular pronouns, singular count nouns, and non-count nouns will all use **has to + base verb**. Point out to students that the contractions *'ve to* and *'s to* are **never** possible.

The negative forms, *do not have to* and *does not have to*, are often contracted to *don't have to* and *doesn't have to*.

I always point out that in speaking, *have to* is often reduced to *hafta* and *has to* is often pronounced *hasta*.

- You **have to call** your friend tonight. It's her birthday and she'll kill you if you forget.
- She **has to bring** her own skis because there isn't anywhere to rent them.
- I told my roommate that **he doesn't have to pay** for groceries this week because I owe him money.

Have Got To

Have got to + base verb is a very old expression in English that is still commonly used nowadays. It is even more informal than *have to* and is commonly used in spoken English and informal writing. Note that this is another modal expression that has subject-verb agreement. Third person singular pronouns, singular count nouns, and non-count nouns will all use **has got to + base verb**.

The negative forms *have not got to* and *has not got to* are **never** used (*do not have to* and *does not have to* can be used instead). The contractions *'ve got to* and *'s got to* are common in writing, and in speaking, the reduced forms *'ve gotta* and *'s gotta* are very common in speaking.

- You **have got to remember** to do your report tonight. It's due tomorrow morning.
- Our teacher **has got to grade** a lot of papers tonight. We need them back to study for the test.
- She's **got to go** to the doctor's right after class.

Fill in the blanks with the following modals

could	should	ought to	had better
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1. We _____ go out dancing, or we _____ stay in and watch a movie.
2. They _____ to take an English class before they go to the US.

3. We'd _____ hurry or we'll be late for the train!
4. You _____ take a taxi home.
5. You _____ walk alone this late at night.
6. I'd _____ wear my sister's nice new coat.
7. Jason _____ better pay me the money he owes me!
8. We really _____ to study for the test.
9. Some people _____ work in customer service. They're terrible with people.
10. She _____ go to the hospital! She hasn't felt very well lately.
11. I _____ spend any more money. To be broke is not easy at all.
12. You _____ apologize to your brother. You were so rude.
13. All children _____ learn how to do chores around the house.
14. We _____ drive in this bad weather.
15. I _____ stay home tonight and study.
16. You _____ call your father on his birthday.
17. I _____ to spend less money on clothes.
18. An English teacher _____ not speak too quickly.
19. You'd _____ eat all of the pizza before I get home! I'll be very angry!
20. There are a lot of ways you _____ make your living room more interesting. For example, you _____ paint the walls a new color, or you _____ move the furniture around and buy a new rug.
21. We _____ to go for a walk before it gets dark.
22. That's a popular band. We'd _____ buy tickets for the concert soon!