# What is a Modal Verb?

A modal verb is a type of **helping verb** used to suggest **ability**, **possibility**, **likelihood**, **obligation**, or **necessity**. Modal verbs may also be used to **ask permission** or **make a request** or **an offer**.

## What Are Some Examples of Modal Verbs?

Modal verbs include:

| can | will | shall | may | could |
|-----|------|-------|-----|-------|

| would | should | might | must |
|-------|--------|-------|------|

They work with another verb in a sentence to clarify or change the meaning somehow.

## How Do They Work?

Here are some **examples** of modal verbs at work in sentences.

| Original Sentence | Purpose of the Modal Verb | Resulting Sentence |
|---|---|---|
| Joe **drives** a car. | to suggest ability | Joe **can** drive a car. |
| Sally **goes** to the store. | to suggest possibility or likelihood | Sally **might** go to the store. |
| Celia **goes** to the dentist. | to suggest obligation or necessity | Celia **should** go to the dentist. |
| I **close** the door. | to ask permission or make a request | **May** I close the door? |

As you can see, with the insertion of a modal verb, the **meaning and/or purpose** of the sentence is **changed slightly**.

## What Are the Rules for Modal Verbs?

**01** Modal verbs **never change their form**—use them exactly as they appear. It doesn't matter if a modal verb is being used in the past, present, or future, the form remains the same.

**Present** Mike **can balance** a spinning basketball on each hand at the same time.

**Past** Molly **could balance** a ball when she was two.

**Future** Our school's team **will balance** balls during the game break on Saturday.

**02** Modal verbs have **no infinitives** ("to" form of a verb) and **no participles** ("-ing" verbs being used as adjectives). This means you should always use the **base form** of a verb after a modal and not conjugate it in any way.

Sue **shall carry** the banner.

Layla **must study** for her test.

Jordyn and Tad **should sit** together at lunch.

**03** To make a negative when using a modal, **use "not" after the modal to make it negative.** Don't try to stick not in other places by using words like don't, wasn't, aren't, etc.

✔ You **should "not" touch** the wasp's nest.

✘ You can't should touch the wasp's nest.

You may use the modal to create a negative contraction, but until you are comfortable doing so, spell them out as separate words.

➡ You **shouldn't** touch the wasp's nest.

➡ He **can't** tell time on an analog watch.

➡ They **mustn't** speak while the teacher is talking.

## How Does All of This Affect Me?

Modal use is quite common and you've probably engaged with them without even knowing it. And it's doubtful that you are going to be asked to define the term modal verb any time soon. However, understanding what modal verbs are, so you **know when and how to use them**, can help ensure that your sentences remain grammatically correct.