

Modal Auxiliary Verbs

The word **auxiliary** means **to help**.

In English grammar we have **auxiliary verbs**. These verbs help other verbs.

The main (primary) auxiliary or helping verbs in English are:

•be •do •have

We also have **modal auxiliary verbs**:

•can •could •will •would •shall •should •must •mustn't •may •might

Auxiliary verbs are **used before** another verb.

The **second verb** is **a basic verb** (infinitive without to).

SUBJECT	AUXILIARY VERB	INFINITIVE (basic verb)	
Tracy	should	speak	slowly.
Trump	shouldn't	be	the president.
Students	mustn't	forget	their homework.
You	can	improve	your English.
People	can't	smoke	in restaurants.

Grammar

•There is no 3rd person s – **She should call an ambulance.**

•Negatives and questions are made without do – **He shouldn't swear.**

Should I leave now?

Modal verbs express many different things.

•Whether or not something is possible

•Making demands

•Giving advice

•Giving permission

•Predicting something

•Suggestions

•Invitations

•Ability

•Preferences

Should / Shouldn't

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
Used to say or ask what is the best thing to do	50% obligation	+	I should see a doctor.
		-	I shouldn't smoke.
		?	Should I ask her?

Write examples for obligation.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
To suggest an action	advice	+	You should stop smoking.
		-	He shouldn't do that.
		?	What should she do?

Write examples for advice.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
Probability	uncertain prediction	+	He should be tired after work.
		-	They shouldn't be long now.
		?	Who should win the election?

Write examples for uncertain prediction

+	
-	
?	

Can (positive)/ Can't (negative)

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
To be able to do something	ability	+	I can swim.
		-	He can't cook.
		?	Can you drive?

Write examples for ability.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
To be allowed to do something	permission	+	I can leave work early today.
		-	They can't eat in class.
		?	Can I use your phone please?

Write examples for permission.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
It is possible	possibility	+	Smoking can cause cancer.
		-	Medicine can't cure Covid.
		?	Can she help you understand?

Write examples for possibility.

+	
-	
?	

Could / Couldn't

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
To be able to do something in the past	past ability	+	I could drive in Spain.
		-	We couldn't work last month.
		?	Could you work in France?

Write examples for past ability.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
To be allowed to	polite permission	+	I could help you.
		-	She couldn't do that.
		?	Could I ask a question?

Write examples for polite permission.

+	
-	
?	

MEANING	EXPRESSING		EXAMPLE
Future possible	possibility	+	It could rain later.
		-	I couldn't let you do that.
		?	Could we have lockdown again?

Write examples for possibility.

+	
-	
?	

English Modal Verbs – Situations Table

Situation	Modal Verb	Example
requests (formal)	may	May I sit down?
requests (informal)	can	Can I sit down?
requests (polite)	could	Could I sit down?
requests (polite)	would	Would you mind if I sit down?
permission (formal)	may	You may sit down.
permission (informal)	can	You can sit down.
obligation (full)	must	You must tell the police the truth.
obligation (partial)	should	You should tell your friends the truth.
obligation (partial) (less common)	ought to	You ought to tell your friends the truth.
logical conclusions (stronger than "should")	must	He left an hour ago, so he must be there already.
logical conclusions (weaker than "must")	should	He left half an hour ago, I believe he should be there already.
possibility (general)	can	It can rain sometimes.
possibility (weaker than "may" and "might")	could	It could rain, but it is not very common in this part of the country.
possibility (weaker than "may")	might	It's not very cloudy yet, but it might rain.
possibility (stronger than "might")	may	It's starting to get cloudy – it may rain soon.
future actions/states/intentions	will	Look at the sky! It will rain soon.

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