

Modal Verbs

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Listen and repeat. Then act out.



The **modal verbs** are: *can, could, may, might, must, ought to, will, would, shall, should, have to, need*. They take no -s in the third person singular except for *have to* and *need*. They come before the subject in questions and are followed by 'not' in negations. Except for *ought to* and *have to*, modal verbs are followed by an infinitive without *to*. Sorry, I *can't* come. I *have to* meet Pam.

Modal verbs are used to express: ability, possibility, probability, logical assumptions, permission, requests, offers, suggestions, advice, criticism, obligation, prohibition or necessity.

Ability

Can / Be able to (ability in the present/future) 'Can' is more usual and less formal than 'be able to' when talking about the present or future.

Ann *can* type fast. I *can* pay you next week. (usual) I *will be able to* pay you next week. (less usual)

Was able to (= managed to do) (ability in the past) is used for either repeated or single actions. I *was able to* go on a trip round the city last week. (single action)

Could (ability in the past) 'Could' is more usual than 'was able to.' It is used in statements for repeated actions. However, with the verbs *see, hear, smell, understand*, etc. we normally use 'could' for single actions. She *could* / *was able to* play the violin when she was six. (repeated action) I *could* smell something burning. (single action) (NOT: ~~I was able to smell~~ ...)

Could / Was able to can both be used in negations and questions for either repeated or single actions.

She *couldn't* / *wasn't able to* pass her driving test. (past single action)

Were you able to / *Could you* get to work every day last week? (past repeated action)

Can is used in the present. **Could** is the past tense of **can**. We use **be able to** to form all the other tenses. I *will be able to* get a job when I finish school.

1 Complete the sentences with *can, can't, could* or *couldn't* and the verbs below.

come

open

read

drive

use

stop

- I'm sorry I ... *can't come* ... to your party on Saturday.
- Oliver's joke was so funny that we laughing.
- Xenia but she hasn't got a car.

- "Oh no, my battery's dead! I my mobile phone."
- When Jake was five, he and write.
- Claire tried but she the door.

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2 Complete the answers using **was / were able to**.

- 1 A: Did you get to the concert on time?
B: Yes, although there was traffic, we *were able to get there on time*.
- 2 A: Did Ben manage to find his watch?
B: Yes. After searching the entire house, he
- 3 A: Did you finish your work in the garden?
B: Yes. It took all afternoon but I
- 4 A: Did you have a hard time finding the place?
B: No. We quite easily.

3 Fill in **can / be able** in the correct form.

- 1 I *will be able* to speak perfect English very soon.
- 2 "..... you hear me, Mum?"
- 3 They swim since they were five.
- 4 When he got to the front door, he hear a dog barking inside the house.
- 5 I would love to fly an aeroplane.

Possibility – Probability – Logical assumptions

Possibility

may / might / could + present infinitive = perhaps; it's possible that something will happen in the future or perhaps it is true at the moment

may / might / could + perfect infinitive = perhaps something happened in the past

Note: **Could + perfect infinitive** is also used for something which was possible but didn't actually happen.

Sam **may / might / could** pass his test this time. (It's possible that he will pass his test.)

Where's Jean? She **could** be at school.

She looks miserable. She **may / might / could have lost** her job. (Perhaps she has lost her job.)

Don't drive so fast! You **could have hit** that dog. (Luckily, you didn't hit the dog.)

Probability

ought to / should + present infinitive = something is probable now or in the future

ought to / should + perfect infinitive = we expected something to happen but we don't know if it happened or not

Tom **ought to / should** pass his exams. (He will probably pass.)

Has Nancy reached Paris yet? **She ought to / should have phoned** an hour ago. (We don't know whether she phoned or not.)

Logical assumptions

can't / couldn't + present infinitive = I don't think so; it's logically improbable

must + present infinitive = I think so, I'm fairly sure; it's logically probable

can't is the opposite of **must**

can't / couldn't + perfect infinitive = It's impossible that something happened in the past.

must + perfect infinitive = It's very probable that something happened in the past.

She **can't** be rich. She lives in a small flat. (I don't think she's rich.)

His face is red. He **must** be very angry. (I think he's very angry.)

It **can't** be true. It **must** be a lie.

She **can't / couldn't have lost** her way; she **must have missed** the train. (= It's not possible she lost her way. It's very probable she missed the train.)

To express possibility in questions we don't use **may**. We use: **Can he? Could he? Is he likely to? Is it likely that? Might he? Can he succeed? Could he succeed? Is he likely to succeed? Is it likely that he will succeed? Might he succeed? Can / Could he have finished?** (NOT: ~~May he have finished?~~, ~~May he succeed?~~ ...)

4 Complete the exchanges with *can't*, *may*, *should* or *must*.

- 1 A: Are you going out this evening?
B: We're not sure. We ...*may*... stay at home.
- 2 A: Juliet's not answering her telephone.
B: Well, she be out then because she always picks up if she's in.
- 3 A: Are the boys playing in their room?
B: They be. They're far too quiet.
- 4 A: Where's Victoria?
B: I don't know. She have been here by now.
- 5 A: I have to work late tonight. If so, would you mind starting dinner?
B: Of course not.
- 6 A: Have you posted your letter to me yet?
B: Yes. You receive it in two days.



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Permission

Asking for permission

can (informal) / **could** (more formal)
may / **might** (very formal)

Can / **Could** I interrupt you for a second?
May / **Might** I speak to the bank manager, please?

Giving or refusing permission

can (informal; giving permission)
Note: *could* is not used in the present to give permission

Can I use your phone? Of course you **can**. (informal)
Could I use your phone? Of course you **can**.
(NOT: ~~of course you could~~)

may (formal; giving permission – also used in written notices or formal announcements)

May I use your phone? Certainly you **may**. (formal)
Luggage **may** be left here. (written notice)

mustn't / **can't** (informal – refusing permission)

I'm afraid you **can't** / **mustn't** enter the room.

may not (formal – refusing permission)

Rubbish **may not** be left here. (written notice)

Talking about permission

can / **be allowed to** (to talk about the future or present)

Pupils **are allowed to** / **can** use the school swimming pool free of charge.

could (to talk about the past – used for repeated actions)

She **could** always play at the park after school.
(repeated action)

was / **were allowed to** (to talk about the past – used for repeated or single actions)

The reporter **was allowed to** (NOT: ~~could~~) take a photo of the pop singer. (single action)

couldn't / **wasn't allowed to** (in negations or questions for either repeated or single actions)

The foreigner **wasn't allowed to** / **couldn't** enter the country without a visa. (single action)