

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?

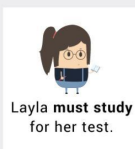
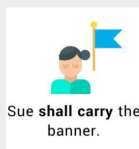
- 01** Modal verbs **never change their form**—use them exactly as they appear. It doesn't matter if a modal verb is being used in the past, present, or future, the form remains the same.

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.



- 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.