

Modal Verbs of Speculation: Present and Past

Grammar Reference: Rules & Structures

Present Speculation

Structure: modal + bare infinitive

- **must + verb:** 90–100% certainty that something is true (*He must be at the office.*)
- **can't + verb:** 90–100% certainty that something is impossible (*She can't be at home; her car is gone.*)
- **might / may / could + verb:** 30–50% possibility (*They might know the answer.*)

Past Speculation

Structure: modal + have + past participle

- **must have + V3:** certainty that something happened (*He must have forgotten his keys.*)
- **can't have / couldn't have + V3:** certainty that something did not happen (*She can't have passed; she didn't study.*)
- **might / may / could have + V3:** possibility that something happened (*They could have missed the bus.*)

Note: In British English, *can't* is universally used for negative certainty. *Mustn't* is never used for logical deduction: it indicates prohibition.

Exercise 1: Choose the Correct Option

Choose the modal verb that best completes each sentence according to context and time reference.

1. Look at all those trophies! He [must / can't] be a fantastic athlete.
2. I phoned Olena ten minutes ago, but there was no answer. She [could be / must have been] out.
3. That man is walking in the opposite direction. He [can't / might] be going to the railway station.
4. The ground is completely dry outside. It [can't have / must have] rained last night.
5. Maksym didn't come to English class today. He [may be / must have been] unwell, but I am not certain.
6. The lights in their flat are switched off. They [must have gone / can't go] to bed already.
7. You only ate five minutes ago! You [can't / must] be hungry again so soon.
8. Sofiia hasn't replied to my email. She [must not / might have] overlooked it in her spam folder.
9. Denys looks exhausted. He [must have worked / can't have worked] a double shift yesterday.
10. Where are my glasses? I suppose I [could leave / might have left] them on the kitchen table.
11. It's 2:00 a.m. in Kyiv right now. Your brother [can't / must] be awake unless he's working late.
12. Taras knows this city inside out. He [can't have / must have] lived here for many years.

Exercise 2: Complete the Sentences

Fill in each blank with an appropriate modal verb (**must**, **can't**, **might**, **may**, or **could**) and the correct form of the verb in brackets (present or past).

1. Her coat is still hanging in the hall, so she _____ (leave) the building yet.
2. The package arrived in Kyiv this morning, so it _____ (be) delivered to your door tomorrow.
3. I didn't hear the alarm clock this morning. I _____ (sleep) very deeply.
4. Look at that queue outside the restaurant! The food _____ (be) superb.
5. Andrii didn't recognise me on the street. He _____ (wear) his contact lenses.
6. She spoke with a distinct regional accent. She _____ (grow up) in the north of England.
7. We are not sure about our summer holiday plans. We _____ (travel) to the Carpathians.
8. It is impossible that you saw Viktor yesterday; he is abroad. You _____ (see) him.
9. Kateryna is smiling broadly as she reads that message. It _____ (contain) good news.
10. The petrol tank is completely empty. We _____ (fill) it up before leaving.
11. I cannot find my umbrella anywhere. I suppose I _____ (leave) it on the tram.
12. That vintage watch looks authentic, but it _____ (be) a modern reproduction; let's check with an expert.

Exercise 3: Sentence Transformation

Rewrite each sentence so that it has a similar meaning, using a modal verb of speculation (**must**, **can't**, **could**, **may**, or **might**) in either the present or past form.

1. I am certain that Oleh is at home because his bicycle is parked outside.
2. Perhaps Nataliia missed the morning train.
3. It is impossible that they finished the entire report in two hours.
4. I am convinced that Roman worked very hard to earn that promotion.
5. It is possible that the shop is closed on public holidays.
6. There is no way that message was meant for you; it has someone else's name on it.
7. I am sure Bohdan is delighted with his exam results.
8. It is possible that Daryna forgot to post the letter yesterday.
9. I am certain that the heating is broken; the radiators are stone cold.
10. Perhaps the courier delivered the parcel to the wrong address.
11. It is impossible that Iryna knows about the surprise party.
12. I am sure you were terrified when the power went out during the storm.