

Modal verbs are also called auxiliary verbs, which means they **CANNOT BE USED WITHOUT A MAIN VERB.**

English has ten modal verbs:

can	could	may	might	shall
should	will	would	must	ought

The grammar is simple. Modal verbs are not conjugated:

1. they have no tense
2. they have no person
3. they never change.

In statements, the word order is **subject + modal + main verb.**

All modal verbs must be followed by a main verb in its **infinitive** form except for **ought** which is followed by an infinitive.

1. They can come to the house.
2. Mike should go home now.
3. You must leave the dog here.
4. We will wait until Sunday.
5. She ought to study harder.

English learners make the mistake of placing an infinitive after every modal verb. This is incorrect.

In making questions, the word order changes to **modal + subject + main verb.**

1. Can they come too?
2. Should Bill drive the car to Miami?
3. Will we be able to leave soon?
4. Could you take the dog for a walk?

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When making a question using the words: when, where, what, why, which, who, or how, the order of words remains the same:

1. When can we eat dinner??
2. Where could we go out tonight?
3. What would be the best thing to do?
4. Why must you always laugh so loud?
5. Which dog will catch the ball first? (exception)
6. Who can help clean the dishes?
7. How could you say such a mean thing?

When forming negative statements, the negative adverb **not** is placed between the modal verb and the main verb.

1. You can't go in there.
2. He shouldn't drive at night anymore.
3. You will not be able to do it alone.

When asking questions in the negative, the modal verb and a negative adverb **not** are usually contracted.

CAN

The modal verb **can** indicates ability or possibility.

1. Birds can sing.

COULD

The modal **could** is used to indicate possibility now.

1. I could run faster than you.

The modal **could + have** is used to indicate an unrealized possibility in the past.

1. I could have been a champion.

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These examples resemble the conditional (explained below) because there is an implied “if” clause.

1. I could have been a champion if I had won the fight.

Note that **can** indicates an ability in the present while **could** indicates an ability in the past.

The modal verb **could** is used to speculate about future possibilities. In the following examples **could** and **might** are synonymous.

2. It could be really hot today. It might be really hot today.
3. That box could be heavy. That box might be heavy.

In *Yes / No* questions, **could** is used to speculate about present or future possibilities.

1. Could this be the place?
2. Could you have done this a little better?

Could and **can** indicate a range of options (hypothetical possibilities).

1. We could go to the movies (or a restaurant, or a ball game, or a friend’s house).

The modal **could** is also used to make requests. In these examples **could** and **can** are synonymous but **could** is more polite.

1. Could you help me, please?
2. Could all of you line up outside?

The modal verb **could** is very important in the formation of conditional sentences. Note there are two clauses: one clause contains the modal **could** and the other is the result clause. In these situations, **could** is used to express hypothetical results.

1. We could catch the bus if we leave now.
2. If you study enough, you will pass the test.

Could is also used to make conjectures about past hypothetical results. The results were not realized because a particular condition was not met.

1. We could have caught the bus if we had left sooner.
2. If you had studied enough, you would have passed the test.

WILL, SHALL

The modals **will** and **shall** are used to talk about the future. When used in this type of phrase, there is no difference in meaning between these two modals; however, **shall** is rarely used in American English.

1. I will make you dinner.
2. Maria will be there when you get home.
3. Henry will graduate in two years.

In *yes-no* questions, **will** is used to ask a favor and **shall** is used to offer a favor.

1. Will you buy that pair of shoes for me?
2. Will you open the door?
3. Shall I buy that pair of shoes for you?
4. Shall I open the door?

MAY, MIGHT

The modals **may** and **might** are used to indicate an uncertain future action. These two modals have the same meaning.

1. I may (might) be gone by the time you get home.
2. It might (may) be very cold tonight.

The modal verbs **may** or **can** are used to give instructions or permission. **May** is more polite.

1. You may get on the bus. (**May** gives permission to do something.)
2. You can get on the bus. (**Can** indicates an ability to do something.)

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The modals **may**, **can**, **could**, and **might** are all used in *Yes-No* questions to make requests. **May**, **could**, and **might** are more polite than **can**.

1. May (can, could, might) I help you with that box?
2. Could (may, can, might) we take the train tomorrow?

MUST

The modal **must** is used to indicate a recommendation or an obligation.

1. You must see that Broadway show.
2. If I must, I will do it this evening.

Must is also used to indicate an assumption.

1. My phone must be broken.
2. If he isn't here, he must be at home.

The modal verb **must** is sometimes used to form rhetorical questions, especially when you want a person to stop doing something.

1. Must you be so noisy?
2. Must that dog bark all the time?

SHOULD, OUGHT

The modals **should** and **ought** are used to indicate an obligation. In this context, these two modals mean the same thing. Remember, **ought** is the only modal verb followed by an infinitive.

1. You should (ought) be in bed with that cold.
2. He ought (should) to save more money, so he can buy that car.

In questions, the modal **should** is used to ask if an obligation exists. **Ought** is never used in questions in American English.

1. Should we offer to help her?
2. Should I pay the waiter now?

WOULD

The modal verb **would**, followed by **like**, is a polite way of stating a preference.

1. We would like to see that movie.
2. I would like a hamburger with french fries.

In questions, **would + subject + like** is a polite request for you to make a choice.

1. When would you like to go?
2. How would you like your drink mixed?

The modal **would** can make a request sound more polite.

Less Polite

More Polite

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Come here, please. | Would you come here, please? |
| 2. Stop grinding your teeth. | Would you stop grinding your teeth? |

Would is used to explain a possibility which is a result of a hypothetical or real condition.

1. I would consider it a privilege to receive that award.
2. He would have been mad if she eat the whole cake.

The modal verb **would** is used to introduce habitual actions in the past.

1. When I lived in the city, I would walk to work.
2. Jim would always eat at that restaurant when he was single.

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