

## Modal auxiliary verbs – a very short guide

### **can / could**

This verb can express:

1. Ability:  
*He can read Italian but can't speak it well*  
*He could play the piano well as a child*
2. Permission (present and future):  
*Can I come in? No, you can't yet*  
*Could I talk to you tomorrow?*
3. (Im)possibility:  
*Nobody can be sure*  
*The train could be late*

### **may / might**

This verb can express:

1. Permission:  
*May I smoke here? (More rarely and more formally: *Might I speak to you?*)*
2. Possibility (present and future):  
*We may arrive a little late*  
*He might come early*

Note that these two verbs often have differences of meaning when we use a question or a negative.

### **shall / should**

*Shall* is arguably going out of fashion to express the future and there's a strong case to be made for not teaching it for that function, especially at lower levels. However, there are other uses of *shall* which are still not always replaceable with *will*. Only the third and fourth in this list is common these days and then only in British English.

1. In questions:  
*Shall I do my homework now?*
2. Insistence:  
*You shall do what I tell you*
3. Intention:  
*I shan't keep you long*
4. Suggestion:  
*Shall we go?*

*Should* is much more common and can express:

1. Obligation:  
*You should write to your mother more often*
2. Logical deduction:  
*He should be there by now*

The negative of the second example is something like

*He won't be there yet / He can't be there yet.*

### **will / would**

1. Willingness:  
*I'll get the milk*  
*Will you have another?*

2. Intention or promise:  
*I'll send you an email soon*  
*We won't keep you*  
*He told me he would write soon*
3. Prediction (often based on past experience):  
*It'll probably rain soon; it often does in November*  
*He knew it would rain*  
*He believed I would come*
4. Insistence:  
*He will keep arguing with me*  
*He would keep changing the subject*
5. Probability:  
*That will be him now*  
*That would be typical of him*
6. Characteristic behaviour:  
*We would often get up really early*  
*When I was younger, I would ...*

**must**

1. Obligation:  
*You mustn't speak to me like that, You must be home at 6*
2. Logical necessity / deduction:  
*That must be his father*  
*There must be an error in the data*

Negating these meanings is tricky. For example:

- a. *You must take the medicine every day.*
- b. *The figure must be correct.*

Sentence a. can be negated 4 ways with two different meanings:

*You mustn't take the medicine every day* (i.e., you are obliged not to)

*You needn't / don't have to / are not obliged to take the medicine every day* (i.e., there is a lack of any obligation)

Sentence b. can be negated two ways:

*The figure mustn't be correct* (i.e., you are obliged to give the wrong answer)

*The figure can't be correct* (i.e., the logical deduction is that it's wrong)

**ought to**

1. Obligation (weaker than must):  
*She ought to ask if she doesn't know.*
2. Logical deduction / expectation:  
*The bus ought to be here by now.*

**A note about tenses**

Only some modal verbs have obvious past-tense forms. Here's a list.

Present	Past
<i>can</i>	<i>could</i>
<i>may</i>	<i>could / might</i>
<i>shall</i>	<i>should</i>
<i>will</i>	<i>would</i>
<i>must</i>	<i>(had to)</i>
----	<i>used to</i>
<i>ought to</i>	----
<i>need</i>	----
<i>dare</i>	<i>dared</i>

There are two pasts of *may*: one for possibility, one for permission. We can say

*I could ask questions*

and

*I might ask questions*

The first means

*I was allowed to ask questions*

OR

*It is possible I'll ask questions*

The second only means

*It is possible that I will ask questions.*

The past of *must* is often *had to* but not in all its meanings.

When we are referring to obligations, the past (and the future) are formed with *have to* as in, for example:

*I had to leave early*

*I will have to leave early*

etc.

When we are referring to logical deduction, we use the perfect form of the verb to make a past tense as in, for example:

*That must have been his sister*

When we make a future tense, we use *have to*:

*The train will have to arrive soon*

### **A note about aspect**

Usually, when a modal's function is to express ability or permission, we can't use progressive or perfect aspects. For other functions we can use these aspects. For example:

#### Possibility

*They may have got lost*

*They may have been driving too long*

*They can't / couldn't have got lost*

*They can't have been driving so long*

#### Necessity

*I must have left my keys on the table*

*She must have been working on a solution*

*You must be joking*

#### Prediction

*They will have driven that way*

*John will still be driving at midnight*