English Modal Verbs

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Modals[1]

1 Syntax

- Modal verbs lack tense and subject/verb agreement (no *s* in the third person singular). For example[2]:

  ⊘He cans visit his mother.

- Modals are **not** separated from the main verb by an infinitive *to*.

  ⊘He can to go.

- In many cases, it is not possible to combine modals.

  ⊘We can should study hard for the exam.
  He will have to improve his English.

- Do not think of "present" and "past" forms of modals (e.g., can/could, will/would, may/might, shall/should).

1.1 Periphrastic verbs

Idioms composed of several words may have similar meanings as some modals and function similarly:

Modal	*Periphrastic modal*
can	be able to
will	be going to, be about to
must	have to, have got to
should, ought to	be to, be supposed to
would	used to
may	be allowed to

However, note that periphrastic verbs differ as follows:

- They require subject/verb agreement.[3]

[1] Some examples in the following sections are adapted from `The Grammar Book` by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman.
[2] In this document, the symbol ⊘ is used to indicate an *incorrect* example.
[3] Except *used to*.

- They require *to* before the main verb.

Other related idioms are *had better*, *would rather*, *would prefer*, and *would like to*.

2 Meaning

The same modal can have different meanings in different contexts. It is helpful to consider two major contexts: **social interaction** and **logical probability**.

2.1 Social interaction

Social interaction concerns **requests** and **advice**. In these contexts, formality and familiarity must be considered.

- The "past tense" forms of verbs are considered more polite than their "present tense" equivalents. Thus, *could* is more polite than *can*, and *would* is more polite than *will*.
- Usually, the auxiliary used in a question is repeated in the short reply. However, when a request uses a past tense modal, the yes/no answer should use the present tense form to indicate more certainty.[4]

Could you help me? Yes, I can.

2.1.1 Requests

Requests (to the other) may be general:

Would/Will you help me with this math problem?
Could/Can you give me a hand?

Or for permission (for oneself):

Might/May I leave the room?
Could/Can I have some water, please?

- The words *will/would* indicate a request. The words *can/could* indicate a request *if possible*.

[4] Otherwise the reply sounds conditional, which may be a desired effect in some cases: "Yes, I could, if you give me a few minutes."

- Periphrastic verbs are not used to make requests — only to ask questions.

  Will you open the door? (request)
  Are you going to open the door? (literal question)

  There is one idiom for polite requests: *would you mind*.

  Would you mind closing the door? (to the other. Note gerund **closing**.)
  Would you mind if I closed the door? (for oneself. Note subjunctive **closed**.)

- In addition to its future time meaning, the word *shall* may suggest advice, in which case it is almost equivalent to *should* (though used infrequently). The word *shall* also appears in some fixed formulas, where its meaning differs from *should*:

  Shall I call her, or will you? (asking advice, $\rightarrow$ shall = should)
  Shall we dance? (invitation)
  Should we dance? (is it advisable?)

2.1.2 Advice

The modal used when giving advice depends on the authority of the person speaking, the degree of urgency, etc. In the following table, advice goes from suggestion to order.

You might/could see a doctor. (comment)
You should see a doctor. (suggestion)
You had better see a doctor. (stronger suggestion)
You must see a doctor. (urgent suggestion)
You will see a doctor. (order)

2.2 Logical probability

Logical probability concerns **inference**, **prediction**, and **possibility**. In these contexts, formality and familiarity are not important, so there aren't polite forms.

2.2.1 Inference

Wilbur: Someone's at the door.
Gertrude: It may be Jim. (inference)

Just as there is a modal hierarchy for giving advice, there is one for inference. In the following table, the mood increases from doubt to certainty. Arrows indicate the most common uses.

Wilbur: Someone's knocking.
Gertrude: That could/might be Jim. (doubtful) ←
That may be Jim. (possible) ←
That should be Jim. (likely)
That must be Jim. (near certainty) ←
That will be Jim. (certainty)

2.2.2 Prediction

In the following table, the prediction goes from weak to strong.

It could/might rain tomorrow. (doubtful)
It may rain tomorrow. (possible)
It should rain tomorrow. (likely)
It will rain tomorrow. (certain)

- Adverbs may replace modals of logical probability. Adverbs do not usually replace modals of social interaction.

It is possible that it will rain tomorrow.
It is quite possible that it will rain tomorrow.
It is probable that it will rain tomorrow.
It is certain to rain tomorrow.

2.3 Other modals

Some modals do not fit into the previous categories:

Ability *can* (for animate objects), *be able to*

Jack can swim
Jack's dog can fetch sticks.

Possibility *can* (for inanimate objects)

Since you have cleaned the fence, it can be painted now.

Desire *would like to*

Offer *would you like*

Preference *would rather*, *would prefer*

2.4 Negative meanings

A negated modal often has a very different meaning than the affirmative meaning. In the following tables, probability decreases from top to bottom:

Affirmative	*Negative*
will (most probable)	can't, couldn't, won't (most improbable)
must	must not
should	shouldn't
may	may not
could, might (least probable)	might not (least improbable)

- *Can* is used frequently to express negative probability, but rarely for positive probability.

  That can't be!
  ⊘ That can be!

- *May* and *might* are not usually contracted with *not*. *Must* is not usually contracted with *not* when referring to logical possibility. It may be for social interaction (meaning "prohibition").[5]

Negated modals usually have the same meaning as their negated periphrastic counterparts.

I cannot do it./I am not able to do it.
We will not do it./We are not going to do it.
You should not lie./You are not supposed to lie.

However, *must not* and *don't have to* have different meanings. The former expresses prohibition and the latter the listener's choice.

[5]It is pronounced /mus'nt/.

You must not play with matches!
You don't have to eat your carrots if you don't want to.

The negative of *had better* is *had better not.* The **had** is often contracted as **'d**:

You'd better not do that! (strong suggestion, like a threat)

2.5 Simple vs. periphrastic meanings

In general, periphrastic modals are less formal than their simple modal counterparts.

France must conserve its resources. (more formal)
We have to conserve our resources. (less formal)

The one apparent exception to this rule is the following:

Can you do it?
Are you able to do it? (sounds more formal)

Periphrastic modals become even less formal when spoken casually:

- Have to → "hafta"
- Have got to → "gotta"
- Going to → "gonna"
- Want to → "wanna"
- Ought to → "oughtta"

2.6 Past and progressive modals

Sometimes, a modal's meaning changes when used in the past.

We could go swimming. (present possibility)
We could have gone swimming. (possible, but not accomplished in past).

The modals *would*, *could*, and *should*, when used in the past, usually imply that the action referred to was not accomplished.

We would have gone swimming, but we didn't have a car. (external cause)
We could have gone swimming, but we went to a movie instead. (internal cause)
We should have gone swimming, but we forgot. (expresses regret)

Modals may be used in a progressive form to indicate concreteness or a sense of present time.

> You must apologize to her. (obligation)
> I simply must go to Paris. (strong desire)
> I must be going. (strong present desire or obligation)
>
> To make money, he could work. (suggestion)
> He could be working. (stronger suggestion, and now!)