



Functions of Modal Verbs

The modal verbs are: **can, could, must, will, would, shall, should, may, might, ought (to)**, etc. They have the same form in all persons. They come before the subject in questions and take **not** after them in negations. They take an **infinitive without to** after them except for **ought** which is followed by a *to infinitive*.

Can she play tennis? No, she **can't play** tennis but she **can play** golf.
He **ought to listen** to you.

We express **ability** with:

can (ability in the present or future) Can you swim? No, I **can't**. I **can** run fast though.

could / was able to (ability in the past for repeated actions)

She **could / was able to** dance for hours when she was young. (repeated action)

was able to (= managed to) (ability in the past for repeated actions or a single action)

He **was able to** win the race. (single action) (**NOT** ~~He could win the race.~~)

BUT: I **couldn't / wasn't able to** find my keys. (single action)

He **couldn't / wasn't able to** ski when he was young. (repeated action)

Can is the Present Simple form and **could** is the Past Simple. **Can** borrows the rest of its tenses from the verb phrase **be able to**. She **hasn't been able to** finish it yet.

We express **possibility / probability** with:

- **may / might** + present infinitive He **may** be back before noon. (It's possible.)
There **might** be some cheese in the fridge. (It's possible.)
- **could** + present infinitive He **could** still be at home. (It's possible.)
- **must** + present infinitive They look alike. They **must** be twins. (I think they are twins.)
- **can't** + present infinitive You have been sleeping all day. You **can't** be tired. (I don't think it's possible that you are tired.)
- **Can ...?** + present infinitive **Can** he still be at work? (Is it possible?)
- **could / might** + perfect infinitive We **could have had** an accident. (It was possible but it didn't happen.)

Might is the past form of **may**. **Might** can also be used for present situations, too.

There's a lot of traffic. I **might** be a little late for the meeting.

May I see Mr Parson?



*I'm sorry, you **can't** see him.
He is busy at the moment.*

We express **permission** with:

(asking for permission)

can (informal)

Can I borrow your pen?

could (more polite)

Could I borrow your car?

may (formal)

May I use your phone?

might (more formal)

Might I see your driving
licence, please?

(giving / refusing permission)

can (informal, giving permission)

You **can** have one more if you want.

may (formal, giving permission)

You **may** stay a little longer.

mustn't (refusing permission)

You **mustn't** park here.

can't (refusing permission)

You **can't** enter this room.

We make **requests, offers or suggestions** with:

can (request)

Can you help me tidy my room?

could / would (polite request)

Could / Would you help me with my homework?

could (suggestion)

Could we go shopping today?

would you like (polite offer)

Would you like some more lemonade?

Shall I / we (suggestion/offer)

Shall I post this letter for you? (offer)

Shall we buy him a present? (suggestion)

will (offer/request) * for the other uses

I'll make you some coffee if you want. (friendly offer)

of 'will' (promises, threats, etc.) see p. 42

Will you do me a favour? (friendly request)

We express **advice** with:

should / ought to You **should** walk more. (general advice; I advise you.)

had better You'd **better** see your dentist. (advice for a specific situation; it is a good idea.)

We express **criticism** with:

should / ought to + perfect infinitive = It would have been better if you had ...

You **ought to have been** more polite to him. (It was the right thing to do but you didn't do it.)

We express **obligation** or **necessity** with:

must (strong obligation, duty or personal feelings of necessity)

You **must** stop when the traffic light is red.
I **must** see a doctor soon. (I decide it's necessary.)

have to (obligation or external necessity)

I **have to** do my homework every day. (the teachers decide it is necessary – not me)

I've got to (informal; it's necessary)

I've got to leave early today.

Must is the Present Simple form. It borrows the rest of its tenses from the verb **have to**. To form questions and negations of **have to** we use **do/does** (Present Simple) and **did** (Past Simple).

He **didn't have to** do the shopping yesterday.

You **don't have to** go to school today.

Does he have to be at work on time?

We express **absence of necessity** or **prohibition** with:

mustn't (prohibition)

You **mustn't** feed the animals in the zoo. (It's forbidden.)

can't (prohibition)

You **can't** enter the country club without a card. (You are not allowed.)

needn't (it is not necessary)

You **needn't** take an umbrella. It isn't raining.

don't need to / don't have to

(it is not necessary in the present / future)

You **don't need to / don't have to** do it now. You can do it later. (It isn't necessary.)

didn't need to / didn't have to

(it was not necessary in the past)

He **didn't need to / didn't have to** go to work yesterday because it was Sunday. (It was not necessary.)