

Modal verbs of ability :
can and may

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Modal verbs of ability

Modal verbs of ability are used to express two different types of ability: open possibility, generally expressed by forms of the modal verb Can, and authority or potential ability, generally expressed by forms of the modal verb May. These two verbs are followed by the infinitive without to.

Open possibility - can and be able to

The verb **can** only exists in the simple present, simple past and present perfect forms.

All persons	Present	Past	Present perfect
Affirmative	can	could	can have + participle
Negative	can not, cannot, can't	could not, couldn't	cannot have

If other tenses are required, the speaker or writer must use forms of the synonymous modal verb "**be able to**". This modal auxiliary has all necessary tenses, as it is in reality just the verb **to be** followed by the adjective **able**.

N.B. : **Be able to** does not have any progressive or continuous forms.

Sample tenses	Present	Present perfect	Imperfect	Future
Affirmative:	am able to, are able to is able to	has been able to have been able to	was able to were able to	will be able to
<i>Negative; sample forms</i>	am not able to , am unable to	has not been able to has been unable to	was not able to was unable to	will not be able to will be unable to

Can and able to are used to express :

- Physical or potential ability
- Authority to do something (by confusion with **may**)
- Can only: in the present perfect, a past possibility. This is particularly common with negative clauses.

Attention !

Take care to distinguish correctly between "could not" and "cannot have"

They could not see the warning sign

= They were unable to see it, for example, because it was hidden

They cannot have seen the warning sign.....

= They must have failed to see it, even though it was there and visible.

Potential possibility or authority - *may and might*

The verb may only exists in the simple present, and past forms The simple past form of may is might . Might is also used in its own right as a present tense modal.

Forms of may

All persons	Present	Passé	Present perfect
Affirmative	may	might	may have
<i>Negative</i>	<i>may not</i>	<i>might not</i>	<i>may not have</i>

Forms of might

All persons	Present	Passé	Present perfect
Affirmative	might	might	might have
<i>Negative</i>	<i>might not</i>	<i>might not</i>	<i>might not have</i>

a) The modal **may** is used to imply potentiality (limited possibility) or authority to do something. Using the modal **may** is frequently the same as qualifying a statement with the word **perhaps**. Its past form **might** is most commonly found in dependent clauses, notably in reported speech.

Note that a synonym of **perhaps** is **maybe....** which is of course composed of the words **may** and **be**.

b) Used in the present perfect form (may + have + past participle), **may** is also used to express **possibility that occurred** (something that perhaps occurred) **in a relative past**, i.e. in past time with relation to the present or to some other moment.

c) **Might** is also used to imply remote possibility, i.e. something that could just be possible. In this sense, it is often combined with **be able to**.

- d) Used in the **present perfect** (might + have + participe passé), **might** is also used to express a hypothetical possibility (affirmative or negative) in the past. This is particularly common in type 3 conditional clauses.
- e) **Might** and **may** can both be used to imply politeness or sarcasm.