Modal Verbs: in context
2 min

What are modal verbs?

She *can* swim.

He *should* go to the doctor.

Modal verbs are a small group of verbs, which are very different from normal verbs.
Common Modal Verbs and their Particularities
28 min

Which verbs are common modal verbs?
Can, could, may, might, should, must, shall, will, would

How are modal verbs different from other verbs?

- They do not take “s” in the third person: he can, she must, it could
- They use “not” in the negative form: they may not, we should not
- They cannot be used in the past or in the future tenses
- There is no “to” after them: I can do, you must see

Which modal verb do we use and when?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modal Verb</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can</td>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>I can drive.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Permission/request</td>
<td>Can I use your phone please?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Capacity in the past (past of ‘can’)</td>
<td>I could not see him.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Polite permission/request</td>
<td>Could I use your phone please?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>We could go to the new restaurant.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Possibility, low probability or one</td>
<td>It could rain today.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>possibility of many</td>
<td>She could be at home.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td>Polite permission/request</td>
<td>May I use your phone please?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Possibility, more probable than ‘could’</td>
<td>It may rain today.</td>
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<td>She may be at home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Same as ‘may’</td>
<td>It might rain today.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>She might be at home.</td>
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<td>Might</td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>He should go to the doctor.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rational probability</td>
<td>He should be fine.</td>
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<td>Should</td>
<td>Obligation, necessity</td>
<td>You must go to school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Very high probability</td>
<td>She must be at home.</td>
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<td>Modal Verb</td>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shall</strong></td>
<td>Obligation in legal documents</td>
<td>The defendant <em>shall</em> pay a fine of $200.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Suggestions Future tense, rare, British</td>
<td>Thou <em>shall</em> not kill.</td>
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<td><strong>Will</strong></td>
<td>A voluntary action</td>
<td>I <em>will</em> make dinner.</td>
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<td>A promise A prediction</td>
<td>The summer <em>will</em> be very hot.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Would</strong></td>
<td>Conditional Past of 'will' Repetition in the past</td>
<td>If I had time, I <em>would</em> travel more.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When I lived in Paris, I <em>would</em> always go to the Champs Elysees.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Some of these common modal verbs have synonyms we often use.

**Examples:**
- *must* = have to, need to
- *she must* leave = *she* has to live = *she* needs to leave
- *should* = ought to
- *he should* speak to his boss = *he* ought to speak to his boss

When we speak, we use contractions with some of the modal verbs in the negative form.

**Examples:**
- *can't* = cannot = can not
- *couldn't* = could not
- *shouldn't* = should not
- *mustn't* = must not
- *won't* = will not
- *wouldn't* = would not
### How can we use modal verbs in the past?

*We can:*

| Use a synonym in the past: to be able to, to be allowed to, to have to, to need to | You can go → You were able to go  
You may go → You were allowed to go  
You must go → You had to go / You needed to go |
| --- | --- |
| Use a modal verb that expresses the past: could (past of 'can'), would (past of 'will') | I could not go  
I thought I would go |
| Use 'modal verb + have + past participle' | He could have gone  
He may have gone  
He might have gone  
He should have gone  
He must have gone  
He would have gone |

### How can we use modal verbs in the future?

*We can:*

| Use a synonym in the future: to be able to, to be allowed to, to have to, to need to | You can go → You will be able to go  
You may go → You will be allowed to go  
You must go → You will have to go / You will need to go |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use a modal verb with an indication of future</td>
<td>We can / could / may / might / should / must go tomorrow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing Exercise  
5 min

Complete the sentences with one of the two choices.

1. You really ___________ watch tv this much. (shall / shouldn’t)
2. She ___________ be at work, she always works at this time. (must / could)
3. Speak up, I ___________ hear you! (can’t / couldn’t)
4. I ___________ hear a word he said. (can’t / couldn’t)
5. Andrew ___________ call his wife urgently. (must / shouldn’t)
6. Thank you for calling Zee Company, how ___________ I help you? (can’t / may)
7. If I go to New York, I ___________ see the Statue of Liberty. (will / would)
8. If I went to New York, I ___________ see the Statue of Liberty. (will / would)
9. It ___________ happen, but it is very unlikely. (shall / could)
10. Emma ___________ go out tonight, her parents said no. (can’t / may)

Writing Exercise  
5 min

Match the two columns to identify the use of each modal verb.

1. Abe should call Lyla soon after their first date.  
   a. obligation
2. Lyla should be happy to get his call.  
   b. possibility
3. Abe calls but she doesn’t pick up, she must be working.  
   c. low probability
4. No problem, he can call her back later.  
   d. rational probability
5. Later he tells her they could go out to dinner again.  
   e. certainty
6. She says she may be available Friday.  
   f. polite request
7. Abe asks if he can call her back Friday morning.  
   g. permission
8. She says she could be in a meeting, the afternoon is better.  
   h. advice
9. Friday afternoon, Abe asks: May I pick you up at 6 pm?  
   i. capacity
10. He must be on time to make a good impression.  
   j. suggestion
Writing Exercise
5 min

Complete the sentences with a modal verb from this list, without using the same one twice: can, could, may, might, should, must, shall, will, would

1. Children ___________ go to school.
2. Before you make a decision, you ___________ speak to a specialist.
3. I ___________ ride a horse, I love horse riding.
4. Let's go, ___________ we?
5. Jake ___________ speak some English before the training.
6. ___________ I please speak to Mrs. Sanders?
7. I promise I ___________ buy you a new phone.
8. He ___________ join us later, he is not sure.
9. If I were you, I ___________ take this opportunity.

Writing Exercise
5 min

Match each sentence to a sentence with the same meaning.

1. Jack must write a report tomorrow.    a. She needs to help him, or the report will not be finished on time.
2. Jack couldn’t write it yesterday.       b. Jennifer’s boss says she is allowed to help Jack.
3. Jennifer says she can help him tomorrow. c. Jack will have to write a report tomorrow.
4. She has to help him, or the report will not be finished on time. d. Jennifer says she will be able to help him tomorrow.
5. Jennifer’s boss says she may help Jack. e. Jack wasn’t able to write it yesterday.
Speaking Exercise with the Instructor
5 min

Listen to your teacher's questions. Then, answer.
Example: What could we do to protect the environment? We could recycle more.
1. Should children spend a limited time in front of the computer?
2. What else could children do to have fun?
3. If your child spent too much time on the computer, what would you do?
4. Do you think a parent must be strict about this?
5. Do you think it may cause weight problems?

Watch the Video!
10 min

With thesesong extracts, you will practice modal verbs.

Watch the video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KcSEnVnQ98

Watch again, and complete the sentences below with the right modal verb:

1. We ____________ as well be strangers.
2. I ____________ get you out of my head.
3. I know I ____________ be what I want to be.
4. If I work hard at it, I ____________ be where I want to be.
5. Even when the darkest clouds are in the sky, you ____________ sigh and you ____________ cry.
6. The show ____________ go on!
7. My make up ____________ be fading, but my smile still stays on.
8. ____________ I stay or ____________ I go?
Quiz  
10 min

True or False?

1. The most polite modal verb to ask for permission is 'may'.  
   true  
   false

2. We use 'to' between a modal verb and another verb.  
   true  
   false

3. We can use the future with modal verbs.  
   true  
   false

4. 'could' is the past of 'can'.  
   true  
   false

Match each situation on the left to a modal verb on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Modal Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. rational probability</td>
<td>a. must</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. very high probability</td>
<td>b. would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. suggestion</td>
<td>c. should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. past of 'will'</td>
<td>d. could</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Put these sentences in the past.

1. I can get in, because I am invited.
2. We must finish our work before going out.
3. You should ask a professional to fix your roof.
4. You may understand his explanation.

Put these sentences in the future.

1. I can get in, because I am invited.
2. We must finish our work before going out.
3. He can fly a kite.
4. You would listen carefully.