

Modal Auxiliary Verbs

Modal Auxiliary Verbs are used with great frequency and with a wide range of meanings.

can	could	may	might
would	shall	should /ought to	must

Modal Verbs expressing **certainty, probability or possibility**

WILL and *WON'T* are used to predict a **future event** or **action** which are seen as **certain**. The truth or certainty of what is asserted is more or less taken for granted.

- I **will** see you later.
- His latest book **will be** out next month.

WILL and *WON'T* are also used to express what we believe or guess to be true **about the present**. They indicate **an assumption** based on our knowledge of people and things, their routine, character and qualities.

- Don't take the meat out of the oven. It **won't** be ready yet.

MUST is used to assert what we infer or conclude to be the most logical or rational interpretation of a situation or event. As we do not have all the facts, it is less certain than *will*. The negative form is *CAN'T*.

- He walked across the Sahara desert! You **must** be joking!.
- She **can't** have a ten-year old daughter! She's only twenty-five herself!

SHOULD expresses what may reasonably be expected to happen. Expectation means believing that things are or will be as we want them to be. This use of *SHOULD* carries the meaning of "*if everything goes according to the plan, then something should happen*"; therefore it doesn't suggest negative or unpleasant ideas.

- You have worked hard. You **should** pass the exam.
- If the flight was on time, he **should have** arrived in Jakarta early this morning.

MAY expresses the possibility that something will happen or is already happening.

- We **may** go to Spain this year. We haven't decided yet.
- A - "Where's Sandra?" B - "I don't know. She **may be** having a bath".

MIGHT, like *may*, expresses possibility, but is more tentative and slightly less certain.

- I **might** not be back in time for supper, so don't wait for me.
- It **might** rain. Take your umbrella.

CAN is used to say that something is possible and actually happens.

- It **can** be expensive to keep a dog (it can be and sometimes is).

We also use *CAN* to indicate that there is a very real possibility of a future event happening.

- We can stay with Jessica in London (we will be able to stay)

COULD expresses the theoretical possibility of something happening. It is used in a similar way to *might*.

- It **could** be expensive to keep a dog (if we had one, it could or it may not be expensive)

It also suggests that something is less likely or that there is some doubt about it.

- We **could** stay with Jessica in London (it's possible, if she's there)

Could not is not used to express a future possibility. The negative of *could* is *MIGHT NOT*.

- It **might not** be right.

Couldn't has a similar meaning to *can't*, but only slightly weaker. Compare it to the previous example.

- She **couldn't** have a ten-year old daughter! She's only twenty-five herself!

OUGHT TO, as well as *SHOULD*, + *HAVE* + *PAST PARTICIPLE* are used to talk about an expectation that something happened, has happened, or will happen.

- If the flight was on time, he **should/ought to** have arrived in Paris early this morning.
- The builders **should/ought to** have finished by the end of the week.

Obligation and Advice: MUST / HAVE TO / SHOULD / OUGHT TO / HAD BETTER

MUST and *MUST NOT* are used in formal rules and regulations and in warnings. They express strong obligation, the opinion of the speaker and are associated with a more formal, written style. We can also use it to remind ourselves to do something.

- Bookings **must** be made at least seven days before departure (**formal rule**)
- You **mustn't** steal. It's very naughty (**strong negative obligation, opinion of the speaker**)
- I must phone Steve when I get home. I said I'd call him last night, but I forgot (**to remind ourselves to do something**)

HAVE TO expresses a general obligation based on a law or rule, or based on the authority of another person.

- Children **have to** go to school until they're sixteen (It's the law)

DON'T HAVE TO expresses the absence of obligation.

- You **don't have to** go to England if you want to learn English.

Sometimes we can use either *HAVE TO* or *HAVE GOT TO*. But we use *HAVE TO* with frequency adverbs such as **always, never, normally, rarely, sometimes**, etc.

- I often **have to** work at the weekend to get everything done.

With the past simple *HAD TO* is used especially in questions and negative sentences.

- When **did** you **have to** give it back?
- We **didn't have to** wait too long for an answer

If *HAVE* is contracted, then we must include *GOT*. It is often preferred in informal speech.

- The experiment has failed twice before, so it's **got to** work this time.
- Don't have a late night. We've **got to** get up early tomorrow.

Sometimes it is possible to find *MUST* and *HAVE TO* together. In this case *MUST* signifies a logical interpretation and *HAVE TO* an obligation. For a present situation:

- Now John's mother is nearly 90 she **must have to** be looked after.

For a past situation:

- I don't know where Sarah is. I presume she **must have had to** go out to meet someone.

We can often use either *SHOULD* or *OUGHT TO* to talk about obligations and recommendations, although *SHOULD* is much more common. They describe a sort of obligation where you have a **choice**.

- I think you **should** wear your glasses whenever you feel like watching TV.
- I haven't heard from Evelyn for ages. Do you think I **should** give her a ring?
- I don't think parents **should/ought to** give their children sweets

We can use *HAD BETTER* instead of *SHOULD/OUGHT TO*, especially in spoken English, to say that we think it is a good idea to do something. We prefer it if we want to express particular urgency and in demands and threats.

- If you are not well, you'd **better** ask Ann to go instead (**good idea to do something**)
- There's someone moving about downstairs. We'd **better** call the police, quickly. (**urgency**)

The negative form is *HAD BETTER NOT*. In question forms the subject comes after *HAD*.

- He'd **better not** be late again or he'll be in trouble.
- **Hadn't** we **better** get a taxi?

Permission: MAY / MIGHT / CAN / COULD

They are used asking for permission, or saying whether we or other people have it. To talk about permission generally, or permission in the past, we use *CAN* or *COULD*. *MAY* is used to ask for and give permission but it sounds very formal.

- **Can/Could** I borrow your car tonight?
- **May** I help you?

Ability: CAN / COULD

CAN expresses ability or is used to say what someone knows how to do, or what is possible. The past is expressed by *COULD*.

- I **can** speak three languages.
- Thanks to his new glasses, he **could** make out what was written on the notice.

In these sentences we can also use **ABLE TO** without any important change of meaning. To express a fulfilled ability on one particular occasion in the past, *COULD* is not used. Instead, we use **WAS ABLE TO** or **MANAGED TO**.

- She was **able to** survive by clinging onto the wrecked boat.
- The prisoner **managed to** escape by climbing onto the roof.

There is a useful difference of meaning between *COULD* and *WAS/WERE ABLE TO*: the latter form says not only that you could do something (it was possible for you), but also that you did it.

- a) The door was open and he **could** go into the room.
- b) The door was open and he **was able to** go into the room.

In sentence a) (*COULD*) we only know for sure that it was possible; Sentence b) (*WAS ABLE*) tells us also that he managed to get in, he succeeded in getting in.

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