

Modal Verbs

Modal verbs (modals) are verbs that add the meaning of logical possibility, ability, necessity, and permission to verbs, which have a degree of strength from stronger to weaker. Modals come before infinitive verbs and the “to” is removed. Modals do not need to match their subject in plural agreement, so there is no need to add an “-s” or “-es” ending to a modal. Modals will often be seen in sentences that are predicting a future possibility, describing an ability, giving advice, making requests, or asking for permission. The nine most common modals are **can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, and must**.

Common Modals

Use	Modals	Examples
Logical Possibility	Must (Most Certain) Will Would Should May Can Could Might (Least Certain)	The dark clouds must mean rain today. Due to the news, the stock will go down. The chemical would help the experiment. The case should prevent cracking. This change may improve the results. Being careless can have bad consequences. The charm could protect you. I might be tired tomorrow.
Ability	Can (Stronger Ability) Could (Weaker Ability) Shall (Suggestion)	He can type 34 words per minute. I could assist by interpreting the results. Shall we dance?
Necessity	Must (Obligation) Should (Advice)	They must go to work today. You should floss every day.
Permission	May (Most Formal) Might Could Can (Least Formal)	May I turn my paper in tomorrow? Might he have some more soup? Could I buy the new model? Can I go to my friend’s house?

(Note: This table does not include all types of modals.)

Logical Possibility

Logical possibility modals add a degree of possibility to an action. “Must” is the strongest modal that implies a possibility will occur while “could” and “might” imply that the speaker is unsure of the action happening.

Examples: The weather report showed a 99% chance of rain, so it must rain. You might find an open store after 12:00 AM.
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In the first example, the modal is “must.” It is placed before the verb “rain” and indicates that the writer believes there is a strong possibility of rain. In the second example, the modal is “might.” It is placed before the verb “find” and indicates that the writer believes there is a low chance the reader will “find an open store after 12:00 AM.”

Ability

Ability modals add a degree to a subject's ability to do an action.

Examples: Pigeons have a special ability; they can recognize themselves in mirrors. The editor could edit 70 pages in two days.
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In the first example, the modal is “can.” It is placed before the verb “recognize” and indicates that the writer knows that pigeons recognize themselves in mirrors. In the second example, the modal is “could.” It is placed before the verb “edit” and indicates that the writer knows to a weaker degree that the editor has the ability to edit “70 pages in two days.”

Necessity

Necessity modals add a degree of recommendation to an action.

Examples: The kids must drink water every day. My students should do their homework every night.

In the first example, the modal is “must.” It is placed before the verb “drink” and indicates a strong recommendation that kids drink water every day. In the second example, the modal is “should.” It is placed before the verb “do” and indicates a weaker recommendation that students do their homework every night.

Permission

Permission modals tend to be used in requests. The strength of the modal will determine how formal a request is by adding a degree of formality to a question.

Examples: May I go to the restroom? Can you throw me the ball?

In the first example, the modal is “may.” It is placed before the subject “I” because it is written in the question format (not as a statement as we’ve seen in previous examples). “May” indicates a strong formality and makes a request to use the restroom. In the second example, the modal is “can.” It is placed before the subject “you” and indicates a more casual request for you to throw the ball.

Activity

Part I

Identify whether the sentence is describing logical possibility, ability, necessity, or permission. Some sentences can be identified as more than one or have multiple uses.

1. You **might** win the lottery, but the chances are low.
2. Alona **can** start a fire in five minutes.
3. Hyunh **should** get braces.
4. **Can** I move out next week?
5. Navya **could** run a mile in 11 minutes.
6. **May** I get my grade tonight?
7. It **could** rain tomorrow.
8. I **can** eat this cotton candy in three seconds.
9. Yang **should** catch his flight tomorrow if he arrives at the airport early.
10. They **must** complete their parts of the assignment, or we **will** fail.

Part II

Fill in the blank with a modal based on the use and degree of strength.

11. Logical Possibility, Most Certain

The restaurant _____ have digital menus on the tables.

12. Logical Possibility, Least Certain

The bus _____ be on time today.

13. Necessity, Advice

Everyone _____ brush their teeth every day.

14. Permission, Most formal

_____ Inessa and I go to the nurse’s office?

15. Ability, Stronger

We _____ write so quickly.

16. Permission, Somewhat formal

Darius, _____ I have another cookie after dinner?

17. Ability, Stronger or Somewhat Certain

I _____ finish my finish my writing test in one hour.

18. Logical Possibility, Less Certain

It _____ snow in Texas if the weather keeps changing.

19. Necessity, Obligation

You _____ not text while you drive!

20. Logical Possibility, Somewhat Certain

The kids _____ have cleaned the house before we get home.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Logical possibility
2. Ability
3. Necessity
4. Permission
5. Logical possibility/ability
6. Permission
7. Logical possibility
8. Ability
9. Logical possibility
10. Necessity and possibility
11. Must/Will
12. Can/Could/Might
13. Should
14. May
15. Can
16. Could
17. Could
18. Can/Could/Might
19. Must
20. Should/May

References

Larsen-Freeman, D., Celce-Murcia, M., Frodesen, J., White, B., & Williams, H. A. (2016). *The Grammar Book: Form, Meaning, and Use for English Language Teachers*.