

English Modal Verbs

English modal verbs are special verbs that are used to show possibility, ability, permission, and so forth.

Examples:

"It **might** rain" – shows possibility.

"I **can** juggle" – shows ability.

"You **may** sit down" – shows permission.

The modal verbs are:

can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will and would.

First of all, what does MODAL mean?

modal = expressing mood.

mood = a way to express the attitude of the speaker to what is being said.

Examples:

"I can paint" means the speaker believes he has the ability to paint.

"I might paint" means the speaker believes there is a possibility for that to happen.

"I will paint" means the speaker has the intention to paint.

English Modal Verbs show us the attitude of the speaker to what is being said.

What is special about the modal verbs?

They are special because they behave differently from other verbs in English:

1. English modal verbs are used together with the base form of another verb.

Examples:

"He **might** come late."

"You **may** leave if you wish."

"We **must** finish this on time."

2. English modal verbs have only one form. You don't add "-ing", "-ed" or "-s" to them.

Examples:

Correct: "We **must** go now."

Incorrect: "We **are** **musting** go now."

Correct: "They said we **could** park here."

Incorrect: "They said we **coulded** park here."

Correct: "She **can** help us."

Incorrect: "She **can**s help us."

3. To form questions use the modal verb itself, but change the order.

Examples:

"He can fix the car tomorrow."

Correct: "Can he fix the car tomorrow?"

Incorrect: "Does he can fix the car tomorrow?"

"We should start packing our things."

Correct: "Should we start packing our things?"

Incorrect: "Do we should start packing our things?"

"She will be ten years old next month."

Correct: "Will she be ten years old next month?"

Incorrect: "Does she will be ten years old next month?"

4. To form negative sentences use the modal verb itself and add "not" or "n't" to it.

Examples:

"He can run fast enough."

Correct: "He can't run fast enough."

Incorrect: "He doesn't can run fast enough."

"She could lift a feather."

Correct: "She could not lift a feather."

Incorrect: "She did not could lift a feather."

"I thought he would come."

Correct: "I thought he wouldn't come."

Incorrect: "I thought he did not would come."

How and when do we use each of the English modal verbs?

Uses of "can" (negative: cannot, can't)

1. **To talk about what you are able to do**

"He is so strong! He can lift that car!"

"She can't come before four o'clock."

"Can he teach?"

2. **To talk about a general possibility**

"The weather here can get really bad."

"These chairs can be folded."

"Such things can happen."

3. **To say that something is allowed**

"He can borrow my book if he needs it."

"You can't smoke in here".

"You can pay with a credit card."

4. **To make a request (this is an informal use, "may" is the formal version)**

"Can you help me with my homework?"

"Can you make some tea?"

"Can you come here, please?"

Uses of "could" (negative: could not, couldn't)

1. **As the past form of "can"**
"He said he **couldn't** come so early."
"I **couldn't** remember who he was."
"They **couldn't** pass the border."
2. **To make a polite request**
"**Could** you open the window, please?"
"**Could** you turn up the heat?"
"**Could** you remind him to call?"
3. **To show possibility ("may" and "might" are stronger)**
"She could be with her parents."
"It could take you months to find a new place."
"He could still win, but it's not very likely."

Uses of "may" (negative: may not)

1. **To show possibility (it is slightly stronger than "might")**
"What he said **may** be true."
"It **may** rain."
"You **may** win the race."
2. **To request or give permission (this is a formal use, "can" is the informal version)**
"You **may** sit down."
"**May** I speak?"
"He **may** not use the car."

Uses of "might" (negative: might not)

1. **As a past form of "may"**
"The weatherman said it **might** rain."
"She mentioned that she **might** come."
"We agreed that it **might** be dangerous."
2. **To show possibility (it is slightly weaker than "may")**
"He **might** pass the exam, but I wouldn't count on it."
"We **might** fail, but let's not think about it."
"I **might** visit on Saturday."

Uses of "must" (negative: must not, mustn't)

1. **To show that you have to do something, for example because it is very important or because it is a rule**
"You **must** stop the car when the traffic light turns red."
"You **must** pay your taxes."
"She **must** stop drinking if she wants to keep her job."
"I **must** go now, otherwise I will miss my train."
2. **"Must not" (or "mustn't") is used to show you are not allowed to do something**
"You **mustn't** steal."
"He **mustn't** talk to his parents like that."
"The fruit of this bush **must not** be eaten because it is toxic."
3. **To show that something is very logical or very likely to be true**
"He left at noon, so he **must** be there already."
"She is not stupid, so she **must** have known what she was doing!"
"They **must** be really rich to live in such a house."

Uses of "ought to" (negative: ought not to)

1. **To say what is the right thing to do ("should" is the more common word)**

"In her condition, she **ought to** quit smoking."

"I believe you **ought to** apologize."

"He was watching TV when he **ought to** have been studying."

Uses of "shall" (short form: 'll, negative: shall not, shan't)

1. **Used with "I" and "we" to talk about the future (especially in formal British English)**

"I **shall** leave tomorrow morning."

"I'll never forget you."

"We **shall** overcome."

"I **shan't** be late again."

2. **Used with "I" and "we" to ask questions or make suggestions**

"**Shall** I close the door?"

"What **shall** we do tonight?"

"Let's start, **shall** we?"

Uses of "should" (negative: should not, shouldn't)

1. **To say what is the right thing to do**

"You **should** be helping your mother."

"If he doesn't like the job, he **should** tell it to his boss."

"If you knew you were going to be so late, you **should** have called."

2. **To give advice or ask for advice**

"You **should** try the new restaurant down the street."

"What **should** I do? **Should** I tell him the truth?"

"**Should** I try to take the exam again?"

3. **To show that something is likely to be true or that it is expected**

"Let's return home, dinner **should** be ready by now."

"We **should** arrive there by twelve o'clock."

"I **should** get an e-mail from him soon."

Uses of "will" (short form: 'll, negative: will not, won't)

1. **To talk about future actions or future states (not plans)**

"I hope he **will** pass his exams."

"She'll be very happy to hear this."

"They **will** not be here on time."

"You **won't** feel a thing."

2. **For promises or intentions**

"Leave it, I **will** do the dishes."

"It must be Joe at the door, so I'll get it."

"I **won't** do that again, I promise."

Uses of "would" (short form: 'd, negative: would not, wouldn't)

1. As the past form of "will" in reported speech

"I will handle it myself." --> "He said he **would** handle it himself."

"I won't be late." --> "He said he **wouldn't** be late."

"She'll change her mind in the end." --> "He said she'd change her mind in the end."

2. To talk about an imagined situation

"What **would** you do if you were a millionaire?"

"I wish he'd take a break."

"I **would** have cleaned the house, but I was too tired."

3. To make a polite request

"**Would** you mind closing the window?"

"**Would** you get me the paper, please?"

"**Would** someone please answer the phone?"

4. To invite someone, or offer something, politely

"**Would** you like a drink?"

"We are going for a walk, **would** you like to join us?"

"**Would** you like to meet her?"

5. To say that you want something or want to do something

I would like = a polite way of saying, "I want."

I would hate = a polite way of saying, "I don't want."

I would rather = a polite way of saying, "I prefer."

"I **would** like a cup of coffee, please."

"I **would** hate to miss this opportunity."

"We'd rather study with you."

- "Would you like to come with us?"

- "I'd love to, but I can't."

English Modal Verbs Table

Modal verb	Usage	Example
can	ability	I can do several things at the same time.
	when something is possible	Miracles can happen.
	permission	You can go now.
	informal requests	Can you come here for a minute?
could	past form of "can"	She said she could pay for us as well.
	polite requests	Could you move your bag, please?
	possibility	It could be that he missed the train.
may	possibility	It may rain tomorrow.
	ask for or give permission (formal)	May I speak?
might	past form of "may"	He said he might change his mind.
	possibility	This might fail.
must	you have to do it	You must obey the law.
	it's very logical or very likely to happen	They left so early, they must be home by now.
must not/ mustn't	you are not allowed to do it	You mustn't smoke in here.
shall	future for "I" and "we"	I shall see him tomorrow.
	questions and suggestions for "I" and "we"	Let's continue, shall we?
should	the right thing to do	She should call the police.
	advice	- What should I do? - You should stop thinking about it.
	what is likely or expected to happen	We should be back by midnight.
will	future action or states (not plans)	Prices will go up next summer.
	promises and intentions	It's alright, I'll pick it up.
would	past form of "will"	He told me he would come.
	imagined situations	What would you do if you were him?
	for polite requests, offers and invitations	- Would you please sit down? - Would you like some tea? - We are meeting with Sarah next Saturday, would you like to come along?
	to say what you want to do or have	I would like a piece of cake.
ought to	the right thing to do	You ought to apologize.

English Modal Verbs – Situations Table

Situation	Modal Verb	Example
requests (formal)	may	May I sit down?
requests (informal)	can	Can I sit down?
requests (polite)	could	Could I sit down?
requests (polite)	would	Would you mind if I sit down?
permission (formal)	may	You may sit down.
permission (informal)	can	You can sit down.
obligation (full)	must	You must tell the police the truth.
obligation (partial)	should	You should tell your friends the truth.
obligation (partial) (less common)	ought to	You ought to tell your friends the truth.
logical conclusions (stronger than "should")	must	He left an hour ago, so he must be there already.
logical conclusions (weaker than "must")	should	He left half an hour ago, I believe he should be there already.
possibility (general)	can	It can rain sometimes.
possibility (weaker than "may" and "might")	could	It could rain, but it is not very common in this part of the country.
possibility (weaker than "may")	might	It's not very cloudy yet, but it might rain.
possibility (stronger than "might")	may	It's starting to get cloudy – it may rain soon.
future actions/states/intentions	will	Look at the sky! It will rain soon.

