

# Modal verbs

A modal verb is an extra verb which is used before the main verb and gives more information about the main verb. An example of a modal verb is the verb 'can'. 'Can' goes before another verb and shows that someone is able to do something. For example in the sentence, 'Lucy can swim', 'can' shows that Lucy is able to swim. The main English modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, must, shall, will, would* and *should*. *Have to, have got to* and *need* are also used as modal verbs.

## Some facts about modal verbs

1. Modal verbs are used before the basic form of the main verb (the 'infinitive') and are used without 'to':
  - ✓ Julia *could* go instead of me.
  - ✗ Julia *could to* go instead of me.
2. Modal verbs do not take 's' in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular:
  - ✓ She *must* get there early
  - ✗ She *musts* get there early.
3. The modal verb 'will' is often shortened to 'll', especially in speech:  
Don't worry - I'll help.

Below are the main ways in which modal verbs are used:

### 1. Showing ability (modal verbs: can, could)

Used to show that someone is able to do something. (*Can* is used to show that someone is able to do something now and *could* is used to show that someone was able to do something in the past):

*I can run faster than you.*  
*I could run faster when I was a child.*

### 2. Saying what is necessary (modal verbs: must, have to/have got to, need to)

Used to say that it is necessary to do something:

*I must call my mum.*  
*I have to finish my essay by tomorrow.*  
*I have got to finish my essay by tomorrow.*  
*I need to go now.*

### 3. Saying what is possible (modal verbs: may, might, could)

Used to say that it is possible that something will happen or possible that something is true:

*We may come if we've got time.*  
*Jim might know what time it starts.*  
*He could be right about that.*

### 4. Saying what is probable (modal verbs: must, will, should)

Used to say that something will probably happen or that something is probably true:

*Here's Anna's coat so she must be here.*  
*She will be here at the usual time.*  
*He should call – he usually does at this time.*

### 5. Asking for permission (modal verbs: could, may, can)

Used to ask if you can do or have something:

*Could I borrow your pen, please?*  
*May I have another biscuit, please?*  
*Can I take this chair, please?*

Note that *could* and *may* are more polite than *can*.

### 6. Making requests (modal verbs: could, can, would)

Used to ask someone to do something:

*Could you tell her to call me?*  
*Can you write down any messages, please?*  
*Would you give these to Louisa, please?*

Note that *could* and *would* are more polite than *can*.

### 7. Giving advice and asking for advice (modal verb: should)

Used to make suggestions about what someone does or to ask someone for suggestions:

*You should complain to the manager.*  
*Should I tell her?*

## 8. Making offers (modal verbs: shall, will, can)

Used to say that you will do something for someone:

*Shall I bring some food?*

*I'll help (= I will help).*

*I can take Juliana home if you'd like.*

### Exercise 1

Choose the correct modal verb to complete each sentence:

1. Even as a small child she *could/can* walk for miles.
2. *Could/would* I borrow your pen, please?
3. Paolo's car is here so he *must/can* be here.
4. She *shall/will* be here before lunch.
5. I *must/must* to speak to Sara before she leaves.
6. *Should/Must* I invite Daniel to the party?
7. If you are unhappy, you *shall/should* tell her.
8. *Shall/should* I help you carry those books?

### Exercise 2 (can)

The modal verb 'can' is used in the following four ways:

1. showing ability
2. asking for permission
3. making requests
4. making offers

Look at the way *can* is used in the following four sentences and decide in which of the above ways (1 - 4) it is being used:

- a. **Can** I come in?
- b. Jessica **can** ski.
- c. **Can** I help you with those boxes?
- d. **Can** you turn the music down, please?

### Exercise 3 (could)

The modal verb 'could' is used in the following four ways:

1. showing ability
2. saying what is possible
3. asking for permission
4. making requests

Look at the way *could* is used in the following four sentences and decide in which of the above ways (1 - 4) it is being used:

- a. He **could** be her brother.
- b. He **could** ride a bike from a very early age.
- c. **Could** you buy some milk on your way home, please?
- d. **Could** I use your mobile, please?