1: Introduction to Modal Verbs

Modals are funny because they don’t act like normal English verbs.

1. They don’t need an auxiliary verb to make a question or a negative.
2. They don’t need an ‘s’ after he, she or it.
3. They are followed by the infinitive without ‘to’.
4. They mostly don’t change for tense.
5. We can usually only use one modal at a time (we can’t say I might could go).

Phrasal Modals

As well as the nine main modals (will / would / must / should / can / could / may / might and shall) we also have ‘phrasal modals’. These are expressions that are more than one word but that are used in a similar way to how we use modal verbs. Examples are ‘have to’ and ‘be able to’.

Sometimes, phrasal modals are less formal than normal modals (‘be going to’ is less formal than ‘will’ and ‘have got to’ is less formal than ‘must’). However, this isn’t always true. ‘Be able to’ is more formal than ‘can’.

Most of the time, the phrasal modals don’t have exactly the same meaning and uses as the normal modal. Instead, the meaning is similar or related.

- Similar to ‘should’: had better, ought to, be supposed to
- Similar to ‘must’: have to, have got to,
- Similar to can/could: be able to / be allowed to
- Similar to may/might: be allowed to
- Similar to will/would: be going to, used to
Unlike normal modals, phrasal modals often have normal tenses and they can also be used after a normal modal in the same sentence: I might be able to help you later. (NOT: I might can help you later.) They can also be used together: I’m going to be able to help you later.

Need and dare, in slightly old-fashioned UK English, can be used with modal grammar. In modern English, they are mostly used as normal verbs with normal grammar.

- Do you dare to jump? (Normal grammar – modern English)
- Dare you jump? (Modal grammar – old-fashioned UK English)
- Do you need to go? (Normal grammar – modern English)
- Need you go? (Modal grammar – old-fashioned UK English)

**Modal meanings**

We don’t usually use modal verbs to say things that are straightforward facts. Instead, we use them to show our opinion about how likely it is that something is true or to interact with another person in a polite way.

Grammar books often say that there are two main ways that we use modals in English:

1: We use the modal verbs to say how likely we think something is. We’re don’t have control over the thing – we’re just giving our opinion about whether or not it’s likely to be true. We use modals in this way, for example, when we’re talking about probability, logical necessity, possibility and prediction.

2: We use modal verbs with a social meaning when we’re talking to other people to talk about things like willingness, permission and obligation and advice. We often use modals in this way to ask another person for something, for example, or to be polite.

It’s not the case that some modal verbs are used for talking about how likely something is and some are for social uses. All modals can be used for both meanings.

We can see the difference in an example like this:
I meet a friend in the shop. She has a basket full of vegetables. I say: You must eat a lot of vegetables! (I feel quite certain that it’s true that she eats a lot of vegetables, because I see all the vegetables in her basket. This is a logical use of ‘must’ – I’m using ‘must’ to show that I’m certain).

My husband is feeling tired. He’s only eaten chips and burgers for a week. I say: You must eat a lot of vegetables! Then you’ll feel better. (I’m giving my husband strong advice. He doesn’t eat enough vegetables and I’m saying very strongly that I advise him to eat lots. This is a social use of ‘must’ to give advice or say something is necessary.)

The modals with perfect and continuous infinitives

We tend to use the continuous infinitive (be + verb-ing) most with ‘will’ and modals of obligation, possibility and logical necessity. The continuous infinitive is not usually used for volition or ability or permission.

We often use the perfect and continuous infinitives for probability and logical necessity.

- Amanda might have missed the bus.
- Julie can’t be working now – it’s 10pm!

We use the perfect and continuous infinitives for obligation (they generally suggest that the thing is not happening / didn’t happen).

- I ought to be studying now.
- She should have finished the report last week!

It’s possible also to use the perfect continuous infinitive.

- You should have been studying when I called you.

In the same way that we use ‘will’ with the continuous infinitive (will + be + verb-ing) to talk about the future as a matter of course, and remove the ambiguity of the volitional meaning of will, we can also use the continuous infinitive with other modal verbs that talk about the future.
• He might be leaving this afternoon. (‘He might leave’ suggests that he might choose to leave, rather than it’s already arranged for him to leave.)

**Passive / perfect / continuous infinitives**

We can use the passive infinitive (be + past participle) after modal verbs.

• The report might be written by Julie.
• The train must be delayed by the weather.

We can also use the perfect passive infinitive (have + been + past participle)

• The children shouldn’t have been taught by that teacher.
• The bread must have been bought by mum.

**Past modals**

Traditionally, some grammar books split modals into past and non-past and list ‘could, would, should and might’ as the past modals. However, this difference is a bit more complicated than it looks.

It’s true that we use ‘could’ as the past of ‘can’ when we’re talking about ability, permission and possibility.

• I can play tennis.
• I could play tennis when I was six.
• John said that he could play tennis.

It’s also true that we use ‘would’ as the past of ‘will’ for prediction, characteristic behaviour and willingness.

• Lucy won’t come with us.
• Lucy wouldn’t come with us.
• Amy said that Lucy wouldn’t go with her.
There is also a very old-fashioned use of ‘might’ as the past of ‘may’ for permission. This is very rare now. It’s still possible to use ‘might’ instead of ‘may’ in reported and indirect speech.

We don’t really use ‘should’ as the past of ‘shall’ any more. It’s more useful to think about them as having completely separate meanings.

In many situations, we prefer to use a semi modal like ‘be going to’ or ‘have to’ if we want to talk about the past. It’s also true that sometimes we use a perfect infinitive to express tense with modal verbs. You can read about this in each section.

- You must be cold (present).
- You must have been cold (past).

However, there are three situations where we use the ‘past’ modals in the same way as we use the past tenses of normal verbs.

1: Hypothetical situations

We use these ‘past tense modals’ to talk about things that are hypothetical. This means that they aren’t really true. This is the same as the way that we use the past tense of normal verbs when we’re talking about something hypothetical or imaginary.

- If I could, I’d go to the beach now.
- I would come and help you, but I’m really busy today.

We also use ‘could’, ‘would’, ‘should’ and ‘might’ in unreal conditionals. You can learn more about this in the conditional course.

Notice that in a subordinate clause, we don’t tend to repeat the modal.

- In that situation, I would work until I finished the project. (Not: until I would finish)
We can use ‘past’ modal + have + past participle for things that weren’t true in the past. This is using a kind of ‘double past’ to talk about unreal things in the past. With normal verbs, we usually use the past perfect, which is also ‘double past’ for unreal things in the past.

- I could have studied medicine but I decided not to.
- I would have gone home earlier but John really wanted me to stay.

2: When we want to be polite or tentative

Just like we use the past tenses of normal verbs to make a request more polite, we also choose these past modals (especially could and would) when we want to be polite or tentative.

- Could I borrow your car?
- Would you help me later?

We used to use ‘might’ as a more tentative or polite form of ‘may, but the difference between ‘may’ and ‘might’ is disappearing. A few people still feel that might is more tentative than may, but this feeling is becoming less and less common.

We also use these past modals to give our opinion in a more indirect or tentative way.

- I think the report could be improved.

This includes using ‘would/wouldn’t’ to show disagreement in a polite way.

- I wouldn’t say that.

3: Indirect and Reported Speech

In indirect and reported speech when we decide to backshift, will becomes would and can becomes could. May often becomes might.

- Direct speech: I can speak Polish.
- Indirect speech: Lucy said that she could speak Polish.
• Direct speech: John will help us later.
• Reported speech: Lucy said that John would help us later.

• Direct speech: The train may arrive late.
• Reported speech: Lucy said that the train might arrive late.