



GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Using Modal Auxiliary Verbs

A verb is the part of speech that expresses action, condition, or being. Verbs change form to indicate person, number, tense, voice, and mood. The main verb of a sentence is often preceded by one or more auxiliary or helping verbs, which together form a complete verb. Auxiliary verbs include forms of “**have**” (has, have, had), “**do**” (does, do, did), and “**be**” (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) as well as the nine modal auxiliary verbs **can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must**. Note that **ought to** is often added to the list of modal auxiliary verbs.

COMMON MEANINGS OF MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS

Modal auxiliary verbs are followed by the base form of a verb to show certainty, necessity, or possibility. Modals and the verbs that follow do not change form to indicate tense or take an “-s” ending. All modal auxiliary verbs can be used in the present, but only “**could,**” “**would,**” “**should,**” and “**might**” can be used in the past. Common meanings of modal auxiliary verbs with their present and past tense forms are as follows:

Use “can, could”

- **to show or infer general ability**

You **can** arrive any time, but you may want to be early to get a good seat.

She **could** recite the entire poem from memory.

- **to make a polite or an informal request**

Can you leave early tomorrow?

Could you give me a ride?

- **to give permission**

You **can** take a day off tomorrow if you can't find a babysitter.

If necessary, you **could** ask for an extension.

- **make a prediction**

If you work hard, you **can** relax for the rest of the semester.

If you continue to improve your grades, you **could** graduate with honors.

Use “will, would”

- **to make a polite or informal request**

Will you join me for lunch?

I **would** appreciate your assistance.

- **to make a formal request**

Will you be quiet!

Would you please pay attention!

- **to show intention or to indicate certainty**

He **will** arrive at the beginning of the concert.

They **would** be the first students to register for the workshop.

- **to make a prediction**

If she receives a scholarship, she **will** continue with her studies.

I **would** be surprised if he is not elected.

Use “shall”

- **to show intention**

We **shall** overcome.

- **to make a polite or informal request**

Shall I open it for you?

Use “should”

- **to indicate expectation**

You **should** receive a new credit card in the mail.

- **to suggest or provide advice**

If you expect to pass the exam, you **should** devote more time to studying.

- **to infer responsibility or obligation**

We **should** work together to protect the environment.

Use “may, might”

- **to make a formal request**

May I speak with you in my office?

You **might** want to reconsider your request.

- **to request permission**

May I leave class early today?

Might I have a word with you?

- **to show possibility**

I **may** want to schedule at least one more appointment.

We **might** attend the next meeting.

- **to make a prediction**

If we cooperate with the opposition, it **may** be to our advantage.

I **might** get there late, but I will be in class tomorrow.

Use “must”

- **to indicate necessity**

We **must** respond as soon as possible.

- **to infer a logical assumption**

Since she is not at her desk, she **must** have already left for the day.

MODALS IN CONDITIONAL STATEMENTS

Modal auxiliary verbs are also used to distinguish realistic or possible conditions from the unrealistic, imaginary, or impossible. In this case, modals are used with conditional clauses, which are introduced by “**if**” or “**unless**” and express conditions of fact, prediction, or speculation. All modal auxiliary verbs may be used to express realistic or possible conditions; to express unrealistic or imaginary situations or conditions contrary to fact in the present, use “**would**,” “**could**,” “**should**,” or “**might**.” To express conditions in the past that did not occur, special modal forms are used: “**would/could/should/might have**” plus the participle.

Realistic Conditions

If I want to see you tonight, I **will** call you.

If you don't eat regularly, you **should** take vitamins.

If he took the train, he **might** be late.

He **ought to** get a reward for all his hard work.

Unrealistic Conditions

If I were rich, I **could** quit my job.

If I won the lottery, I **would** give you a million dollars.

Special Modal Forms: Past Conditions that Did Not Occur

If you had given me the money, I **would have paid** the rent on time.

If I had known you would be late, I **could have taken** the bus.