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.