

modal verbs: functions

- ability
- possibility
- probability
- logical assumption
- necessity
- obligation

I can speak 3 languages.

mental ability

**I could ride a bike when
I was 5.**

physical ability

I was able to set a record.

single ability
esp.in difficult conditions

He could be tired.

possibility

**50% certain it's possible
he is tired**

He may be tired.

possibility

**50% certain it's possible
he is tired**

He might pass the test.

least possibility

**40% certain perhaps he will
pass the test**

**He might/ may/ could
have missed the bus.**

possibility in the past
50% certain

He can't still be at home.

logical assumption
90% certain

He must be at home.

logical assumption
90% certain

**He can't have forgotten
about the meeting.**

**logical assumption about
the past
90% certain**

**He must have missed
the bus.**

**logical assumption about
the past
90% certain**

**It can be very cold in
winter in Alaska.**

general possibility

It may be cold today.

specific possibility

I must see a doctor soon.

necessaty
I say so

**He has to wear overalls at
work.**

necessity

from outside the speaker

We've got to move house.

necessity
informal

They had to move house.

necessity
past

The cat needs feeding.

OR

The cat needs to be fed.

necessity

**You ought to behave
yourself.**

necessity

**She doesn't have to/
doesn't need to come.**

absence of necessity
it isn't necessary

**She didn't have to/
didn't need to come.**

**it wasn't necessary for her
to come
and we don't know if she did**

**She needn't have come
so early.**

**it wasn't necessary for her
to come but she did**

I must cut down on fats.

obligation

I need to; I say so

I have to cut down on fats.

obligation

**I'm obliged to; the doctor
says so**

**I had to cut down or else I
would have become
overweight.**

obligation
past

**We ought to stay within
the speed limit.**

obligation

**It is the right thing to do, but
we don't always do it**

**We ought to have stayed
within the speed limit.**

obligation

**It was the right thing to do
but we didn't do it**