

# modal verbs

## functions

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

- prohibition/ duty
- criticism
- advice
- request
- permission
- offers/ suggestions

ability

can  
could  
be able to  
was able to

She **can** dance well.

She **could/was able to** dance well when she was young.

(repeated action - ability in the past)

She's **able to** type 120 words per minute.

They **were able to** buy a car after saving for years. (single action in the past)

He **couldn't/wasn't able to** save the patient.

# possibility-probability-logical assumption

## different degrees of certainty

50% sure				99%
might-	could-	may-	can-	must
				can't

**He might/ may/ could pass the test.**

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

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

**It may be cold today.**

**He must have missed the bus.**

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

# possibility

can  
could  
may  
might  
be likely to

He **can't** still be at home. (90% certain)

He **could/may** be tired. (50% certain it's possible he is tired)

He **might** come later. (40% certain perhaps he will come later);

He **could** have hit her. (luckily he didn't - past)

He **may/might** have sold his house. (perhaps he sold it - past)

It **is likely** that Ann will offer to help.

Ann **is likely** to offer to help.

It **was likely** that she had missed the bus. (past)

She **was likely** to have missed the bus. (past)

**Note:** to express possibility in questions we use:

Is he likely to ...?

Is it likely that he ...?

Can he ...?

Could he ...?

Might he ...?

Could he still be at work?

**(NOT: may)**



# probability

will  
should  
ought to

He **will** come tomorrow. (100% certain; prediction)

He **should/ought to** come by later. (90% certain; future only; it's probable)

He **should/ought to** have reached Rome by now. (He has probably reached Rome.)

# logical assumption

must  
can't  
couldn't

He **must** be tired. (90% certain - positive; I'm sure he is tired.)

He **must** have arrived by now. (positive; I'm sure he has arrived.)

It **can't/couldn't** be a fake. (negative; I'm sure it isn't a fake.)

She **can't/couldn't** have hurt him. (negative; I'm sure she didn't hurt him.)

# necessity

must

have to/ have got to

need

don't need to/ don't have to

didn't need to/didn't have to

needn't have done

ought to

The cat **needs** feeding. OR The cat **needs** to be fed. (it is necessary)

The cat **needed** feeding. OR The cat **needed** to be fed. (it was necessary)

You **ought to** behave yourself. (it is necessary)

She **doesn't have to/doesn't need** to come. (it isn't necessary - absence of necessity)

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** see a doctor soon. (I say so)

I **had to** see a doctor. (I was obliged to; past)

He **has to** wear overalls at work. (necessity from outside the speaker)

He **had to** wear overalls when he was at school. (past)

We've **got to** move house. (informal)

They **had to** move house. (past)

# obligation

must  
have to  
ought to



I **must** cut down on fats. (I need to; I say so)

I **have to** cut down on fats. (I'm obliged to; the doctor says so)

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

(past)

We **ought to** stay within the speed limit. (It is the right thing to do, but we don't always do it.)

We **ought to** have stayed within the speed limit. (It was the right thing to do but we didn't do it.)

# prohibition/ duty

mustn't

can't

couldn't

must

had to

ought to

**You **can't** enter this area.**

**(prohibition - you aren't allowed to)**

**They **couldn't** enter that area. (prohibition - they weren't allowed to)**

**You **mustn't** touch the statues. (prohibition - it is forbidden)**

**You **may** not talk in the library. (prohibition - formal)**

All applicants **must** fill in this form.(duty)

All applicants **had to** fill in that form. (duty - past)

People **ought to** respect the environment. (It is the right thing to do but people don't always do it.)

He **ought to** have notified the police of the burglary. (It was the right thing to do but he didn't do it.)

# criticism

could  
should  
ought to

You **could** at least call her. (present)

You **could** at least have called her yesterday. (past)

He **should** let us know.

He **should have let** us know before. (but he didn't)

You **ought to** be more helpful.

You **ought to have been** more helpful. (It was the right thing to do, but you didn't do it.)

# advice

should  
ought to  
had better  
shall I  
should have done  
must

You **should** stop talking. (general advice; I advise you)

You **should have stopped** talking. (BUT you didn't)

You **ought to** comply with the regulations. (I advise you; most people believe this.)

You **ought to have contacted** a lawyer earlier. (BUT you didn't)

You **had better** not lie to her. (It isn't a good idea; advice on a specific situation)

It **would have been better if** you hadn't lied to her. (BUT you did)

**Shall** I enter the competition? (asking for advice)



# requests

can  
will  
could  
would you  
would you mind

**Can** I see the Manager? (informal)

**Could** I see the Manager? (polite)

**May** I see the Manager, please?(formal)

**Might** I see the Manager? (very formal)

**Will** you do my shopping? (informal)

**Do/Would you mind** working overtime? (polite; formal)

# offers

I'll do  
can I  
Shall I  
would you like

**I'll/ We'll** carry your bags. (informal)

**Can** I/ we carry your bags? (informal)

**Shall** I/we collect your laundry?(informal)

**Would** you like to stay with me for a couple of days?

**Would you like me** to give you a lift?

# asking for permission

can  
could  
may  
might

**Can** I use your pen?

**Could** I go out for a minute? (more polite; asking for permission)

**May** I use your phone?

**Might** I have the pleasure of your company? (very formal; asking for permission)

giving permission

can  
could  
may  
be allowed to

You **can** take my car. (giving permission; informal)

I **could always/was always allowed** to stay up late on Saturdays when I was a child. (general permission in the past)

He **was allowed to** take my car. (an action that really happened in the past)

You **may** go out for a minute. (formal: giving permission)

You **are allowed to** see the patient. (permission)



# refusing permission

can't  
couldn't  
mustn't  
may not  
to be allowed

You **can't** take my car. (refusing permission; informal)

He **wasn't allowed to/couldn't** take my car. (past)

I'm sorry, but you **can't/mustn't** I make long distance  
phone calls. (informal; refusing permission)

Visitors **may not** take pictures of the statues. (formal;  
refusing permission - written notice)

# suggestions

shall we  
we can/ could...  
why don't we  
what about  
how about  
let's

**Shall** we have a break?

I/We **can** watch TV.

We **could** go to the theatre tonight.

We **could have stayed** longer if you'd wanted. (past)

**Let's** play football!

**Why don't** we play football?

**How about** playing football?

**What about** playing football?