

modal verbs

The modal verbs are can, could, may, might, must, will, would, should, ought to. They are known as modal auxiliary verbs because they 'help' another verb.

I **can** swim.

Do you think I **should** go?

Form

1 There is no -s in the third person singular.

She can sing. He must be tired. It might rain.

2 There is no do/does/don't/doesn't in the question or negative.

What **should** I do? **Can** I help you? You **mustn't** steal!

He **can't** swim. I **won't** be a minute.

3 Modal auxiliary verbs are followed by the infinitive without to.

The exception is ought to.

You must go. I'll help you. You ought to see a doctor.

4 They have no infinitives and no -ing forms. Other expressions are used instead.

I'd love to **be able to** sing. I hate **having to** get up on cold,
winter mornings.

5- They don't usually have past forms. Instead, we can use them with perfect infinitives:

You **should have told** me that you can't swim. You **might have** drowned!

or we use other expressions: **I had to** work hard in school.

Note

Could is used with a past meaning to talk about a general ability.

I could swim when I was six. (= general ability)

To talk about ability on one specific occasion, we use was able to/managed to.

The prisoner **was able to/managed to** escape by climbing on to the roof of the prison. NOT could escape.

Use

1 Modal verbs express our attitudes, opinions, and judgements of events. Compare:

'Who's that knocking on the door?'

It's John.' (This is a fact.)

'Who's that knocking on the door?'

'It **could/may/might/must/should/can't/'ll** be John.' (These all express our attitude or opinion.)

2 Each modal verb has at least two meanings. One use of all of them is to express possibility or probability. (See Unit 9 p147.)

I must post this letter! (= obligation)

You **must** be tired! (= deduction, probability)

Could you help me? (= request)

We **could** go to Spain for our holiday. (= possibility)

You **may** go home now. (= permission)

'Where's Anna?' 'I'm not sure. She **may** be at work.' (= possibility)

T1/ Complete the sentences with model verbs

(must , would , should , could , can , might)

- 1- ----- you like to drink coffee
- 2- ----- swim when I was six.
- 3- You ----- stop eating too much chocolate.
- 4- You ----- come early to your work every day.
- 5- When he was young. He ----- swim very well.
- 6- Take an umbrella. It ----- rain later.
- 7- Your hair is too long. You ----- get a haircut.
- 8- ----- you mind if I asked you something.
- 9- This is impossible.----- be a mistake.