

## 3.07 Modal auxiliary verbs

### What are "modal auxiliary verbs"?

The verbs **can, could, will, would, should, may, might, must, ought and shall** are verbs which 'help' other verbs to express a meaning: it is important to realise that "modal verbs" have no meaning by themselves. A modal verb such as *would* has several varying functions; it can be used, for example, to help verbs express ideas about the past, the present and the future. It is therefore wrong to simply believe that "would is the past of will": it is many other things.

### A few basic grammatical rules applying to modal verbs

Modal verbs are NEVER used with other auxiliary verbs such as *do, does, did* etc. The negative is formed simply by adding "not" after the verb; questions are formed by inversion of the verb and subject:

*You should not do that.*

*Could you pick me up when I've finished?*

Modal verbs NEVER change form: you can never add an "-s" or "-ed", for example.

Modal verbs are NEVER followed by *to*, with the exception of *ought to*.

### What sort of meanings do modals give to other verbs?

The meanings are usually connected with ideas of **DOUBT, CERTAINTY, POSSIBILITY and PROBABILITY, OBLIGATION and PERMISSION (or lack of these)**. You will see that they are not used to talk about things that definitely exist, or events that definitely happened. These meanings are sometimes divided into two groups:

**DEGREES OF CERTAINTY:** certainty; probability; possibility; impossibility

**OBLIGATION/FREEDOM TO ACT:** permission, lack of permission; ability; obligation.

Let's look at each modal verb separately, and the functions they help to express:

## **Will**

### **Making personal predictions**

*I don't think the Queen **will** ever **abdicate**.*

*I doubt if I'**ll** **stay** here much longer.*

### **Talking about the present with certainty (making deductions)**

*I'm sure you **will understand** that there is nothing the Department can do*

*There's a letter for you. It'**ll** **be** from the bank: they said they'd be writing.*

### **Talking about the future with certainty**

*I **won't be** in the office until 11; I've got a meeting.*

*Don't bother ringing: they'**ll** **have** left for their 10 o'clock lecture.*

### **Talking about the past with certainty**

*I'm sure you **will have noticed** that attendance has fallen sharply.*

### **Reassuring someone**

*Don't worry! You'**ll** **settle** down quickly, I'm sure.*

*It'**ll** **be** all right! You won't have to speak by yourself.*

### **Making a decision**

*For the main course I'**ll** **have** grilled tuna.*

*I'm very tired. I think I'**ll** **stay** at home tonight.*

### **Making a semi-formal request**

***Will** you **open** the window, please? It's very hot in here.*

*Sign this, **will you**?*

### **Offering to do something**

*You stay there! I'**ll** **fetch** the drinks.*

## ***Insistence; habitual behaviour***

*I'm not surprised you don't know what to do! You **will keep** talking in class.*

*Damn! My car **won't start**. I'll have to call the garage.*

## ***Making a promise or a threat***

*You can count on me! I'll **be** there at 8 o'clock sharp.*

*If you don't finish your dinner off, you'll **go** straight to bed!*

## **Shall**

*Shall* is a form of *will*, used mostly in the first person. Its use, however, is decreasing, and in any case in spoken English it would be contracted to "-ll" and be indistinguishable from *will*.

The only time you do need to use it is in questions, when:

### ***Making offers***

***Shall** I fetch you another glass of wine?*

### ***Making suggestions***

***Shall** we go to the cinema tonight?*

## **May and Might**

May & might sometimes have virtually the same meaning; they are used to talk about possibilities in the past, present or future. ("Could" is also sometimes used).

*May* is sometimes a little bit "more sure" (50% chance); whereas *might* expresses more doubt (maybe only a 30% chance).

May & might are used, then, for:

### ***Talking about the present or future with uncertainty***

*She **may be** back in her office: the lecture finished ten minutes ago.*

*I **may go** shopping tonight, I haven't decided yet.*

*England **might win** the World Cup, you never know.*

## **Talking about the past with uncertainty**

*I'm surprised he failed. I suppose he **might have been** ill on the day of the exam.*

They can also sometimes be used for talking about permission, but usually only in formal situations. Instead of saying *May I open a window?* we would say *Is it all right/OK if I open a window?* or *Can I open a window?* for example. You might, however, see:

*Students **may not** borrow equipment without written permission*

## **May**

### **Talking about things that can happen in certain situations**

*If the monitors are used in poorly lit places, some users **may experience** headaches.*

*Each nurse **may be** responsible for up to twenty patients.*

### **With a similar meaning to although**

*The experiment **may have been** a success, **but** there is still a lot of work to be done. (= **Although** it was a success, there is still ...)*

## **Might**

### **Saying that something was possible, but did not actually happen**

*You saw me standing at the bus stop! You **might have stopped** and **given** me a lift!*

## **Would**

### **As the past of will, for example in indirect speech**

*The next meeting will be in a month's time becomes*

*He said the next meeting **would** be in a month's time.*

### **Polite requests and offers (a 'softer' form of will)**

***Would** you like another cup of tea?*

***Would** you give me a ring after lunch?*

***I'd** like the roast duck, please.*

***In conditionals, to indicate 'distance from reality': imagined, unreal, impossible situations***

*If I ruled the world, every day **would** be the first day of Spring.*

*It **would** have been better if you'd word processed your assignment.*

***After 'wish', to show regret or irritation over someone (or something's) refusal or insistence on doing something (present or future)***

*I wish you **wouldn't** keep interrupting me.*

*I wish it **would** snow.*

(This is a complicated area! Check in a good grammar book for full details!)

***Talking about past habits (similar meaning to used to)***

*When I was small, we **would** always visit relatives on Christmas Day.*

***Future in the past***

*The assassination **would** become one of the key events of the century.*

**Can and Could**

***Talking about ability***

***Can** you speak Mandarin? (present)*

*She **could** play the piano when she was five. (past)*

***Making requests***

***Can** you give me a ring at about 10?*

***Could** you speak up a bit please? (slightly more formal, polite or 'softer')*

***Asking permission***

***Can** I ask you a question?*

***Could** I ask you a personal question? (more formal, polite or indirect)*

***Reported speech***

*Could* is used as the past of *can*.

He asked me if I **could** pick him up after work.

### **General possibility**

You **can** drive when you're 17. (present)

Women **couldn't** vote until just after the First World War.

### **Choice and opportunities**

If you want some help with your writing, you **can** come to classes, or you **can** get some 1:1 help.

We **could** go to Stratford tomorrow, but the forecast's not brilliant. (less definite)

### **Future probability**

*Could* (NOT can) is sometimes used in the same way as *might* or *may*, often indicating something less definite.

*When I leave university I might travel around a bit, I might do an MA or I suppose I **could** even get a job.*

### **Present possibility**

*I think you **could** be right you know. (NOT can)*

*That **can't** be the right answer, it just doesn't make sense.*

### **Past possibility**

*If I'd known the lecture had been cancelled, I **could** have stayed in bed longer.*

## **Must**

Examples here refer to British English; there is some variation in American English.

### **Necessity and obligation**

*Must* is often used to indicate 'personal' obligation; what you think you yourself or other people/things must do. If the obligation comes from outside (eg a rule or law), then *have to* is often (but not always) preferred:

*I really **must** get some exercise.*

*People **must** try to be more tolerant of each other.*

You **musn't** look - promise?

If you own a car, you **have to** pay an annual road tax.

### **Strong advice and invitations**

I think you really **must** make more of an effort.

You **must** go and see the film - it's brilliant.

You **must** come and see me next time you're in town.

### **Saying you think something is certain**

This **must** be the place - there's a white car parked outside.

You **must** be mad.

What a suntan! You **must have** had great weather.

The negative is expressed by can't:

You're going to sell your guitar! You **can't** be serious!

She didn't wave - she **can't** have seen me.

## **Should**

### **Giving advice**

I think you **should** go for the Alfa rather than the Audi.

You **shouldn't** be drinking if you're on antibiotics.

You **shouldn't have** ordered that chocolate dessert - you're not going to finish it.

### **Obligation: weak form of must**

The university **should** provide more sports facilities.

The equipment **should** be inspected regularly.

### **Deduction**

The letter **should** get to you tomorrow - I posted it first class.

## ***Things which didn't or may/may not have happened***

*I **should have** renewed my TV licence last month, but I forgot.*

*You **shouldn't have** spent so much time on that first question.*

## **Ought to**

*Ought to* usually has the same meaning as *should*, particularly in affirmative statements in the present:

*You **should/ought to** get your hair cut.*

*Should* is much more common (and easier to say!), so if you're not sure, use *should*.