

Modal Verbs

1. What Are Modal Verbs?

A **modal verb** is a type of **auxiliary verb** that combines with a **main verb** to express meanings such as:

- ability
- possibility
- permission
- advice
- obligation
- necessity
- requests

Compare these two sentences:

Emma speaks English.

This sentence tells us a fact.

Emma **can** speak English.

The modal verb **can** adds the meaning of **ability**.

2. Common Modal Verbs

Modal	Common Meanings
can	ability, permission, possibility
could	past ability, polite requests, possibility
may	permission, possibility
might	possibility
should	advice, recommendation
must	obligation, necessity
have to	obligation, necessity

3. Form

Most modal verbs have the same basic structure.

Affirmative

Subject + modal + base verb

Examples:

- I can swim.
- We must leave now.

Notice:

The main verb stays in its **base form**.

Correct:

- She can swim.

Incorrect:

- She can swims.
- She can swimming.
- She can to swim.

Negative

Subject + modal + not + base verb

Examples:

- I cannot (can't) drive.
- They mustn't park here.

Questions

Modal + subject + base verb

Examples:

- Can you help me?
- Could you repeat that?

No auxiliary **do** is needed.

Correct:

- Can you swim?

Incorrect:

- Do you can swim?

4. CAN

A. Ability

Can expresses present ability.

Examples:

- I can drive.
- She can play the piano.
- They can speak Spanish.

B. Permission

Can is also commonly used to ask for or give permission.

Examples:

- Can I open the window?
- You can use my computer.

C. Possibility

Sometimes **can** expresses general possibility.

Example:

- Winters can be very cold here.

5. COULD

A. Past Ability

Examples:

- I could read when I was five.
- My grandfather could ride a horse.

B. Polite Requests

Examples:

- Could you help me?
- Could you close the door?

These requests are generally more polite than using **can**.

C. Possibility

Could sometimes expresses possibility.

Example:

- It could rain later.

6. MUST

Must expresses:

- strong obligation
- necessity
- rules decided by the speaker

Examples:

- You must wear a seatbelt.
- I must finish my homework.
- Visitors must show identification.

7. HAVE TO

Although **have to** is not a modal verb, it often expresses obligation.

Examples:

- I have to work tomorrow.
- She has to wear a uniform.
- We have to catch the train.

The obligation usually comes from:

- rules
- laws
- work
- school
- circumstances

Must vs Have To

Both express obligation.

In many everyday situations they can be used interchangeably.

Examples:

- I must leave now.
- I have to leave now.

However, speakers often use:

must

- for personal obligation
- for strong instructions

have to

- for external rules or circumstances

8. MUSTN'T vs DON'T HAVE TO

This is one of the most important distinctions.

Mustn't

Means:

It is prohibited.

Examples:

- You mustn't smoke here.
- Students mustn't use phones during exams.

Compare:

You mustn't park here.

→ Parking is prohibited.

You don't have to park here.

→ Parking is optional.

Don't have to

Means:

It is not necessary.

Examples:

- You don't have to come early.
- You don't have to wear a tie.