

The D-Book of Grammar

Modals Unlocked



Modal Verbs constitute a group of auxiliary verbs. Therefore, they can never be used alone. They always need another verb, the main verb, to complete their meaning.

Each modal verb basically adds a certain meaning to the main verb.

Modal verbs do not function as the main verbs do. That means that they do not “obey” to the same grammar rules regarding their conjugation in endings and in tenses.

Modal Verbs:

- Never take an –s, as ending
- Never take an –ing, as ending
- Are never followed by a “to”. The main verb always follows in “do” form (bare infinitive).
- Form their Interrogative and Negative Forms on their own, without the help of another auxiliary verb.

Concerning the tenses:

All simple modal verbs define the Present and the near Future.

Some modal verbs though, have a semi-modal verb as their synonym. While modal verbs cannot be changed in a way to turn into other tenses, their equivalent semi-modal can be formed in all verb tenses.

Let's begin!

Can

1. General ability or possibility.

ex. Sandy can speak French but she can't speak German.

2. Friendly request, permission or offer.

ex. -Can I come with you?

-You can use my computer.

-Can I help you with your homework?

3. To express slight criticism.

ex. Mark can be rude to people sometimes.

Can't

1. Inability

ex. George can't speak Spanish.

2. Denial of Permission

ex. You can't enter that room!

3. To say that something is impossible to be happening.

ex. Mary can't be at work now. Her sister is having a baby.

Could

1. General ability in the past.

ex. When Samantha was 4 years old, she could ride a bike.

2. Possibility in the present or near future.

ex. Mrs. Mary could be our new history teacher.

3. For polite requests

ex. – Professor, could you please explain to me the difference between these two theories?

4. To make a suggestion

ex. We could try adding a little bit more salt to this recipe.

5. We can also use “could” in questions in order to emphasize that we feel frustration about something that happened.

ex. How could you leave her waiting at the school for so long?

Couldn't

1. Inability in the past
 - ex. When Jeremy was 16 years old, he couldn't drive a car.
2. Negative deduction/conclusion
 - ex. Mary couldn't be still on the way to work- She left 2 hours ago!
3. In combination with comparative degrees of adjectives or adverbs to express possibility/impossibility
 - ex. Sarah could try a little bit harder in her French course.
 - ex. Your idea couldn't be more amazing!

Be able to

1. This semi-modal is an exact synonym of "can" and it can be used to express ability in the present, past or future.
 - ex. They will be able to fly to Istanbul tomorrow.
2. Ability to do a challenging action in the past.
 - ex. Last Sunday, Natalie was finally able to finish her University dissertation. (*could* is not possible to be used in this case)
3. It is often accompanied by other modal verbs, such as *may/might/would/should* and after other verbs as *want, hope* or *expect*.
 - ex. I hope to be able to get this scholarship!
 - ex. They might be able to help us in this project.

May/Might

1. Future or general possibility.
ex. The students may/might travel to London.
2. To make a polite request or to ask permission (The modal verb 'Might' is more formal than 'May').
ex. – May I see your passport, please?
ex. – Might I join the meeting?
3. *Might* can be used to criticise a person or a situation.
ex. You might make a phone-call for us not to worry!
4. *Might* is often used to make a suggestion or to give advice in a really polite manner.
ex. You might try revising vocabulary every weekend if you want to remember more words.
5. *May* is generally more certain than *Might*.
ex. He may pass this exam, after all.
6. *May* can be used to express wishes or hopes.
ex. May you be happy!
7. The phrase “we may/might as well do something” when there is nothing more interesting, useful, better to do or when we compare one unpleasant situation to another.
ex. It has started to rain. We might as well go home.
ex. This movie is terrible. I might as well watch T.V.

Must

1. For orders and strong recommendations.

ex. You must obey to the hospital's rules.

2. A personal obligation that the speaker feels, not that is necessarily imposed to him by rules/regulations or others.

ex. I must start going to the gym!

3. For certainty or positive logical assumptions and deductions.

(For negative ones we use *can't*)

ex. You must feel fulfilled with your work's great success!

The semi-modal verb-synonym of must is **have to**. We use **have to** to express obligation and strong recommendation in the past and future. Its conjugation is the same as any simple verb's.

Mustn't:

1. Prohibition.

ex. You mustn't smoke inside a restaurant.

- In American English, mustn't is sometimes used for negative assumptions or deductions.
- In British English, *can't* is used in this case.

Have to:

1. External obligation and necessity

ex. You have to submit the paper by Monday.

Don't have to

1. Lack of Necessity

ex. You don't have to come, if you don't want to.

Mustn't and *Don't have to* express two completely different ideas.

Mustn't means that it is something wrong or prohibited by the law.

Don't have to means that is something not necessary.

Need/Needn't

1. This modal verb has the exact same meaning as the regular verb *need to*.

Should/Ought to

1. Advice, recommendation or obligation

ex. You should go to the gym three times a week.

2. Probability or expectation of something to happen.

ex. The airplane should be landing any minute now.

3. *Should* can politely introduce a suggestion.

ex. Should we set off at 7 o'clock in the morning tomorrow?

4. *Should* is used in clauses in order to express personal reactions (often combined with adjectives)
ex. –It’s strange that you should say that!
ex. – Imagine who should be there waiting for me...
5. *Should* can be used as a synonym of “if” in the first Conditional.
ex. Should more people arrive, we will manage accordingly.

Had better

1. Really strong advice (stronger than *ought to* or *should*). It implies a warning of negative consequences.
ex. You had better not come to work late again!

Be supposed to

1. Similar meaning to *Should*, it implies external obligation. Also, it shows the contrast between what actually happens and what is/was expected to happen.
ex. Kate is supposed to start work at 9 o’clock every morning.
ex. Ben was supposed to have finished this project by now.

The auxiliary verbs *will*, *won’t*, *would*, *shall*, are purposefully omitted from the list, even if they belong to the Modal Verbs category. The reason for this is because they are thoroughly explained in other chapters of the English Grammar.

Modal Perfect

The Modal Perfect form is used to refer to past actions or to make speculations/ deductions about the past.

Could have

1. Unfulfilled possibility or ability in the past.
ex. He could have informed us (but he didn't)
2. Uncertainty about things that we do not know.
ex. I don't know where Mary was. She could have gone to the supermarket.

Couldn't have

1. To express disbelief or great surprise.
ex. She couldn't have left from that far on foot!

Can't have

1. To express a negative deduction about the past.
ex. He hadn't been studying all year. He can't have passed!
- In American English, in this case *Must not have* is more common.

Needn't have

1. An action that happened but that was unnecessary. Both *needn't have* and *shouldn't have* can be both used to thank people politely.
ex. You needn't have brought me a cake!

Should/Ought to have

1. Unfulfilled expectation, regret or even criticism for advice that was not followed in the past.
ex. You shouldn't have lied to me about what happened.

May/Might have

1. Uncertainty about a past action
ex. The boss might have told me that but I can't remember for sure.
2. Past possibility that didn't happen.
ex. You might have had a car crash at that time!

Must have

1. Logical assumption or deduction about something that happened in the past.
ex. The door of the apartment is open. Burglars must have broken in.

Would have

1. A possible event that could happen in the past but never happened because of a real obstacle.

ex. I would have called you but someone stole my phone!

Let's Practice!

Exercise 1. Put "can", "can't", "could", "couldn't". If none of these is possible, then put "be able to" in the correct tense.

1. - _____ you ride a bike when you were 7 years old?
2. When Jeremy was 9 years old, he _____ easily read a book on his own.
3. He _____ arrive at the meeting on time, despite the unexpected strike in the public means of transport, so he was relieved.
4. She's quite amazing! She _____ speak six languages, including Arabic!
5. I looked everywhere for my keys but I _____ find them anywhere!
6. I was delayed at the airport for hours due to inclement weather. Finally, I _____ get a flight early in the next morning.
7. I _____ understand this maths exercise! Will you please help me?
8. Some years ago, my grandmother _____ to knit an entire blanket in a few hours!
9. All students _____ obtain their degrees when they become truly determined to do so.
10. Majed _____ play the piano. He has never taken any lessons. However, he _____ play the guitar with great skill.

Exercise 2. Put "mustn't" or "don't/doesn't have to".

1. We have a really important meeting tomorrow. You _____ be late!
2. The museum has a free entrance. You _____ pay to get in.
3. All people _____ smoke in hospitals.
4. George _____ go to London to practice his English. He could do it here, as well.
5. New parents _____ worry too much about potential dangers for their children.
6. Teachers _____ be strict with students' mistakes at all times.
7. Children _____ talk to strangers.
8. While being on a diet, we _____ forget the benefits of exercise.

9. People _____ all the time about the future. Whatever will be, will be.
10. You _____ forget to check that everything is locked in the house before departing on a trip.

Exercise 3. Complete with “must+ bare infinitive” or “must + have+ past participle”

1. That woman owns a fortune. She _____ (be) really wealthy.
2. -Your car keys are not on the table. You _____ (place) them somewhere else when you came back last night!
3. Sandy opened the door of her apartment and a surprise gift was waiting for her. Her boyfriend _____ (offer) it to her.
4. Joanne has just passed her Proficiency Certificate Examination. She _____ (be) truly happy!
5. The house temperature is really high! We _____ (leave) the heating on while we were away.
6. Her mastery of that language is absolute! She _____ (spend) hours of practising it!
7. George _____ (be) truly in love to have made such an amazing wedding proposal to his fiancée.
8. All students _____ (be) well prepared for that test last week. All of the passed with flying colours!
9. The new school is full of students. It _____ (be) really effective.
10. Anna was trembling throughout the interview last Thursday. She _____ (be) really stressed.

Exercise 4. Complete with “must” or “can’t”.

1. -Look at them! They have been looking at this map for quite some time now. They _____ (be) lost!
2. I know this man looks like him but it _____ (be) Brad Pitt!
3. All pastry delicacies are perfect in that place! The _____ (have) an amazing pastry chef.
4. He left London just an hour ago. He _____ (be) here already!
5. -Look at these two friends! Their personalities _____ (match) absolutely for them to have such an amazing connection.
6. My mother isn’t answering her phone. She _____ (be) driving at this moment.
7. -Look at how calm he is! He _____ (have) heard the news, yet.
8. A lot of people seek to collaborate with her. She _____ (be) really successful at what she does!
9. -Snow is falling! The temperature _____ (be) over 0 C degrees.

10. – Look at all this luxury! This _____ (be) in fact the most expensive hotel in the city.
11. –Where’s Sean? He _____ (be) at the corner café as he often goes there to study.
12. –What an amazing collection of books have! You _____ (love) books!
13. Rania is amazing at photography! She _____ (have) practiced for thousands of hours.
14. The car in front of us is going very slowly. They _____ (be) looking for something!
15. –What you just said _____ (be) the truth, can it?

Exercise 5. Complete with the correct Modal Perfect combination (must/mustn’t have done, could/couldn’t have done, should/shouldn’t have done, would/wouldn’t have done, needn’t have done, might/might not have done, can’t have done).

1. I _____ (invite) so many people at my graduation party! I think there isn’t enough space for everyone.
2. I _____ (start) blogging years ago!
3. The weather _____ (be) any worse for us to set off on our road trip.
4. He _____ (take) the promotion he has always wanted, yet John got a divorce at the same time.
5. Sandy _____ (finish) writing her first book, yet she has to find a publisher’s house.
6. We _____ (eat) so much pizza last night! We both feel awful today.
7. George _____ (buy) an invaluable ring to her but she decided she wanted a new laptop instead.
8. My sister _____ (finish) her job earlier, if I had told her there was an emergency.
9. – I am so cold! I _____ (wear) warmer clothes on this trip.
10. Andrew _____ (go) to Oxford University for a Master’s Degree, but he decided to travel across Europe for an entire year.
11. You _____ (speak) to your parents like that last night.
12. They _____ (be) nicer to me. They took care of everything I needed before I even ask for it.
13. I didn’t have as much time as I needed to complete my paper. I _____ (start) earlier in the morning!
14. Richard _____ (do) this to anyone! I don’t believe you!
15. I _____ (travel) to Egypt by plane but I decided to travel by boat.

Exercise 6. Choose between “must have/ might have/ should have/ can’t have” to complete the sentences.

1. Majed _____ (leave) for London yet. I just saw him downtown this morning!
2. Natalie looks really satisfied. She _____ (do) really well at her interview this morning.
3. -I didn’t know you were going out last night... You _____ (tell) me because I would have come with you!
4. He didn’t answer to me last afternoon! He _____ (be) really busy at work for him to call me today.
5. It is really strange that Jim hasn’t prepared my coffee yet. He _____ (talk) on the phone to receive new orders.
6. - Why is Margot still late? She _____ (delay) in traffic on her way here.
7. Richard _____ (communicate) with us a lot sooner. Now, I’m afraid it’s too late.
8. I have been searching the whole place! He _____ (forget) his books here.
9. It was extremely cold last night! It _____ (snow) on the mountains.
10. He hasn’t been studying all year. He _____ (pass) the exam!
11. What an amazing car he has bought! He _____ (win) the lottery!
12. - Congratulations on your great success! It _____ (be) easy for you to have accomplished all that on your own!

Exercise 7. Complete with the correct form of modal or modal perfect.

1. You _____ (study) more for your upcoming exams.
2. They _____ (go) to the same school in the past but that doesn’t mean that they are friends now.
3. I wanted to buy more things at that shop but I didn’t because of the shop-assistant. He _____ (be) a little kinder, you know!
4. - _____ I offer you a seat, dear Sir?
5. We _____ (cross) any street without checking.
6. The government announced that they _____ (increase) the taxes next year.

7. The boys _____ (finish) their homework. They just started studying 30' minutes ago!
8. The meeting _____ (be) more effective if all parties had equally prepared for it.
9. -How come Susan didn't come to the premiere? I guess it _____ (slip) her mind that it was tonight.
10. The tour guide _____ (be) more helpful during our visit to the archaeological sites.
11. - _____ you have a prosperous and fulfilling new year!
12. The plane _____ (be) landing any minute now.
13. The new manager _____ (be) in his early forties.
14. - _____ we have pizza tonight?
15. -Oh!!! You _____ (bring) me such a great gift for my birthday!!! Thank you!

ANSWERS

Exercise 1.

1. Could
2. Could/ was able to
3. Was able to
4. Can/ is able to
5. Couldn't
6. Was able to
7. Can't
8. Could/was able to
9. Can/are able to
10. Can't/can

Exercise 2.

1. Mustn't
2. Don't have to
3. Mustn't
4. Doesn't have to
5. Don't have to
6. Mustn't
7. Mustn't
8. Mustn't
9. Don't have to
10. Mustn't

Exercise 3.

1. Must be
2. Must have placed
3. Must have offered
4. Must be

5. Must have left
6. Must have spent
7. Must be/Must have been
8. Must have been
9. Must be
10. Must have been

Exercise 4.

1. Must be
2. Can't be
3. Must have
4. Can't be
5. Must match
6. Must be
7. Can't have
8. Must be
9. Can't be
10. Must be
11. Must be
12. Must love
13. Must have
14. Must be
15. Can't be

Exercise 5.

1. Shouldn't have invited
2. Should have started
3. Couldn't have been
4. Might have taken
5. Might have finished
6. Shouldn't have eaten
7. Would have bought
8. Could have finished/Might have finished
9. Should have worn
10. Could have gone/ Might have gone
11. Shouldn't have spoken
12. Couldn't have been nicer
13. Should have started
14. Couldn't have done/ Can't have done this
15. Could have travelled/ Might have travelled

Exercise 6.

1. Can't have left
2. Must have done
3. Should have told
4. Must have been
5. Must have talked
6. Must have delayed/ Might have delayed
7. Should have communicated
8. Can't have forgotten
9. Must have snowed
10. Can't have passed
11. Must have won
12. Can't have been

Exercise 7.

1. Should study
2. Might have gone/Could have gone
3. Could be/Could have been
4. May/Might/Could/Can
5. Mustn't cross
6. May/might increase
7. Can't have finished
8. Would/Could/Might have been
9. Must have slipped
10. Couldn't be
11. May
12. Must/Should be
13. Must/Can/Could/Might be
14. Could/Can/May
15. Needn't have brought me

