

## MODAL AUXILIARIES

**Modal auxiliaries** are auxiliary verbs that lend different shades of meaning to the main verb to which they are attached. Modals help to express the mood or attitude of the speaker and convey ideas about possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, advisability, and permission.

**The single-word modal auxiliaries are:**

|       |       |      |        |       |
|-------|-------|------|--------|-------|
| Can   | May   | Must | Shall  | Will  |
| Could | Might |      | Should | Would |

**Some phrasal modal auxiliaries are:**

|             |                |             |          |             |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Be able to  | Be supposed to | Have to     | Ought to | Have better |
| Be going to | Be to          | Have got to | Used to  |             |

## SINGLE-WORD MODAL AUXILIARIES

Single-word modal auxiliaries are always followed by the simple (or "stem") form of the verb.

Here are some examples of the how single-word modal auxiliaries influence meaning:

| Statement           |   | Meaning   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| I <i>can</i> go.    | → | I am able to go. / I have permission to go.                                     |
| I <i>could</i> go.  | → | If certain conditions were met, I would be able to go.                          |
| I <i>may</i> go.    | → | It's not certain, but there's a chance that I'll go. / I have permission to go. |
| I <i>might</i> go.  | → | It's not certain, but there's a chance I'll go.                                 |
| I <i>must</i> go.   | → | I am obliged to go.   |
| I <i>shall</i> go.  | → | I am going (in the future).   |
| I <i>should</i> go. | → | It is advisable/recommended/obligatory that I go.                               |
| I <i>will</i> go.   | → | It's certain that I am going (in the future). / I am willing to go.             |
| I <i>would</i> go.  | → | My going is uncertain; it depends on certain conditions.                        |

The following chart demonstrates some uses for single-word modal auxiliaries. Notice that in some cases when the verb tense changes, the modal is replaced with another word or group of words. Empty spaces denote non-existent forms.

| MODAL | MEANING                                     | PRESENT FORM  | PAST FORM  | FUTURE FORM  | NEGATIVE FORM  |
|-------|---|---|--|--|--|
| Can   | 1. Ability                                  | He <b>can</b> play the piano.                               | He <b>could</b> play the piano.                                    | He <b>will be able to</b> play the piano.                        | He <b>cannot</b> play the piano.                                 |
|       | 2. Opportunity                              | I <b>can</b> go now that I've finished working.             | I <b>was able to</b> go when I finished working.                   | I <b>can</b> go when I finish working later tonight.             | I <b>cannot</b> go.  |
|       | 3. Permission                               | Their parents say they <b>can</b> have a party.             | Their parents said they <b>were allowed</b> to have a party.       | Their parents will surely say that they <b>can</b> have a party. | They <b>cannot</b> have a party.                                 |
|       | 4. Informal request (refers to near future) |   |  | <b>Can</b> I borrow your book?                                   | <b>Can't</b> I borrow your book?                                 |
|       | 5. Possibility (usually a generalization)   | It <b>can</b> be tiring to study and work at the same time. |  |  | It <b>can't</b> be tiring to sit around and watch TV all day!    |
| Could | 1. Past of can                              |   | Before I hurt my wrist, I <b>could</b> toss pizza dough.           |  | Even before I hurt my wrist, I <b>couldn't</b> toss pizza dough. |
|       | 2. Conditional                              |   | I <b>could</b> have made an omelet if we had had the ingredients.  | I <b>could</b> make an omelet if we have the ingredients.        | I <b>couldn't</b> make an omelet even if we had the ingredients. |
|       | 3. Suggestion                               |   | You <b>could</b> have taken a long weekend to visit your family.   | You <b>could</b> take a long weekend to visit your family.       |  |
|       | 4. Polite Request (refers to near future)   |   |  | <b>Could</b> you phone me when you arrive?                       | <b>Couldn't</b> you phone me when you arrive?                    |
|       | 5. Possibility / Impossibility              | Ms. Stevens <b>could</b> be the electors' choice for mayor. | Ms. Stevens <b>could</b> have been the electors' choice for mayor. | Ms. Stevens <b>could</b> become mayor.                           | Ms. Stevens <b>couldn't</b> be the electors' choice for mayor.   |
| May   | 1. Permission                               | You <b>may</b> submit your paper via email now.             | You <b>were allowed to</b> submit your paper via email.            | When you finish, you <b>may</b> submit your paper via email.     | You <b>may not</b> submit your paper via email.                  |
|       | 2. Polite Request (refers to near future)   |   |  | <b>May</b> I use your phone?                                     |  |
|       | 3. Possibility                              | The bakery <b>may</b> be open now.                          | The bakery <b>may</b> have opened earlier today.                   | The bakery <b>may</b> open later today.                          | The bakery <b>may not</b> open.                                  |
| Might | 1. Request (refers to near future)          |   |  | <b>Might</b> I use your phone?                                   |  |
|       | 2. Conditional                              | If you give me a chance, I <b>might</b> impress you!        | If you had given me a chance, I <b>might</b> have impressed you!   | If you will give me a chance, I <b>might</b> impress you!        | Even if you give me a chance, I <b>might not</b> impress you.    |
|       | 3. Suggestion                               |   | You <b>might</b> have called to say you weren't coming.            | You <b>might</b> call to say you aren't coming.                  | You <b>might not</b> want to call to say you aren't coming.      |
|       | 4. Possibility                              | My dog <b>might</b> be the one who made the mess.           | My dog <b>might</b> have made the mess.                            | My dog <b>might</b> make a mess.                                 | My dog <b>might not</b> make a mess.                             |

| MODAL                          | MEANING  | PRESENT FORM   | PAST FORM  | FUTURE FORM   | NEGATIVE FORM   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|---|---|
| Must<br><br><br><br>(Must not) | 1. Certainty   | She <b>must</b> be the best athlete in our school's history. | She <b>must</b> have been the best athlete in our school's history.        |   | She <b>must not</b> be the best athlete in our school's history.        |
|                                | 2. Strong recommendation                                 | To be healthy, you <b>must</b> eat well.                     | To have stayed healthy, you <b>should</b> have eaten better.               | To be healthier, you <b>should</b> eat better.                    | To be healthy, you <b>mustn't</b> eat poorly.                           |
|                                | 3. Necessity   | Visitors <b>must</b> sign in at reception.                   | In the past, visitors <b>had to</b> sign in at reception.                  | In the future, visitors <b>must</b> sign in at reception.         | Visitors <b>don't have to</b> sign in at reception.                     |
|                                | 4. Prohibition   |  |  |   | You <b>must not</b> disrupt his concentration.                          |
| Shall                          | 1. Inevitability   |  |  | One day, we <b>shall</b> overcome our dependence on oil.          | Humanity <b>shall never</b> abandon the quest for immortality.          |
|                                | 2. Promising (British usage)                             |  |  | I <b>shall</b> ensure that everything goes according to plan.     | I <b>shall not</b> let you down.  |
|                                | 3. Future Action (British usage)                         |  |  | Our train <b>shall</b> arrive ahead of schedule.                  | Our train <b>shall not</b> arrive ahead of schedule after all.          |
| Should                         | 1. Recommendation  | For strong bones, you <b>should</b> drink milk.              | For stronger bones, you <b>should</b> have drunk milk.                     | For strong bones, you <b>should</b> start drinking milk.          | You <b>shouldn't</b> drink too much milk.                               |
|                                | 2. Obligation  |  |  | I <b>should</b> return this library book.                         |   |
|                                | 3. Expectation   | She <b>should</b> be at the airport right now.               | She <b>should</b> have arrived at the airport by now.                      | She <b>should</b> arrive at the airport before 9 o'clock tonight. | She <b>shouldn't</b> be at the airport yet.                             |
| Will                           | 1. Future Action   |  |  | We <b>will</b> go to the movie tonight.                           | We <b>will not</b> go to the movie tonight.                             |
|                                | 2. Promising   |  |  | I <b>will</b> ensure that everything goes according to plan.      | I <b>will not</b> disappoint you.                                       |
| Would                          | 1. Past of <i>will</i>                                   |  | You said we <b>would</b> go to the movie.                                  |   | You said we <b>wouldn't</b> go.   |
|                                | 2. Conditional   | If I were in trouble, I <b>would</b> ask him for help.       | If I had been in trouble, I <b>would</b> have asked him for help.          | If I got into trouble, I <b>would</b> ask him for help.           | Even if I got into trouble, I <b>would not</b> ask him for help.        |
|                                | 3. Repetition in the past / habitual action or behaviour |  | When we were kids, we <b>would</b> always play street hockey in the alley. |   | When we were kids, we <b>would not</b> play street hockey in the alley. |

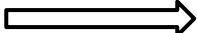





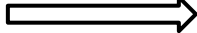
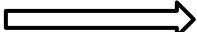
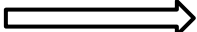
## PHRASAL MODAL AUXILIARIES

Like single-word modal auxiliaries, phrasal modals are always followed by the simple (or “stem”) form of the verb.

Unlike single-word modals, however, most phrasal modals contain the verbs *be* or *have*, which must be conjugated to identify tense and number (*I am*, *you are*, *he/she/it is*, *I was*, *you were*, *he/she/it was*, etc). Exceptions are *used to* and *ought to*, which require no change in verb form.

*Had better* is never conjugated, and it does not include the word *to* as the other phrasal modals do. Like single-word modals, it is followed immediately by the simple form of the verb.

Here are some examples of how phrasal modal auxiliaries influence meaning:

| Statement            |   | Meaning   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| I am able to go.     |    | I can go. / I have permission to go.                      |
| I am going to go.    |   | I will be going (in the future).                          |
| I am supposed to go. |  | It is understood/expected/agreed-upon that I will go.     |
| I am to go.          |  | I am expected/obliged to go. / I have been ordered to go. |
| I have to go.        |  | I am obliged to go.                                       |
| I have got to go.    |  | I am obliged to go (extra emphasis on the obligation).    |
| I ought to go.       |  | It is recommended/advisable that I go.                    |
| I used to go.        |  | I went on a regular basis (habitual action in the past).  |
| I had better go.     |  | It is advisable that I go.                                |

The following chart demonstrates some uses for phrasal modal auxiliaries. Notice that in some cases when the verb tense changes, part of the modal is replaced with another word or group of words. Empty spaces denote non-existent forms.

| MODAL          | MEANING                          | PRESENT FORM                                      | PAST FORM   | FUTURE FORM   | NEGATIVE FORM   |
|----------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Be able to     | Ability                          | She <b>is able to</b> join us.                    | She <b>was able to</b> join us.   | She <b>will be able to</b> join us.   | She <b>is not able to</b> join us.                                  |
| Be going to    | Plan (for the future)            |   | I <b>was going to</b> start university next fall.   | I <b>am going to</b> start university next fall.                                  | I <b>am not going to</b> start university next fall.                |
| Be supposed to | Expectation                      |   | He <b>was supposed to</b> bring dessert, but I guess he forgot.                           | He <b>is supposed to</b> bring dessert tonight.                                   | He <b>is not supposed to</b> bring anything tonight!                |
| Be to          | Expectation / obligation         |   | She <b>was to</b> see the project through to its end, but she left before its completion. | She <b>is to</b> see the project through to its end, no matter how long it takes. | She <b>is not to</b> see the project through to its end after all.  |
| Have to        | Obligation (= must)              | I <b>have to</b> leave now.                       | I <b>had to</b> leave then.   | I <b>have to</b> leave in approximately 10 minutes.                               | I <b>do not have to</b> leave.                                      |
| Have got to    | Strong obligation                | I <b>have got to</b> prepare my presentation now. | I <b>needed to</b> prepare my presentation at that time.                                  | I <b>have got to</b> prepare my presentation as soon as I finish dinner.          | I <b>do not need to</b> prepare my presentation anymore. I'm ready! |
| Ought to       | 1. Recommendation                | One <b>ought to</b> express one's gratitude.      | We <b>should have</b> sent a note to our hostess.   | We <b>ought to</b> send a thank you note to our hostess.                          | We <b>ought not</b> forget. *to is dropped in the negative          |
|                | 2. Certainty                     | When one studies hard, one <b>ought to</b> pass.  | With all the studying she did, she <b>ought to have</b> passed her exam.                  | With all the studying she's done, she <b>ought to</b> pass her exam.              |   |
| Used to        | Habitual past action / behaviour |   | My grandfather <b>used to</b> walk 3 miles to and from school every day!                  |   |   |
| Had better     | Recommendation                   |   |   | You <b>had better</b> go. It's getting late!                                      | You <b>had better not</b> go. The weather looks pretty nasty!       |

For more information on modals and other auxiliary verbs, please refer to the following websites:

- <http://www.englishpage.com/modals/modalintro.html>
- <http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/auxiliaryverb.htm>
- <http://grammar.ccc.comment.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/>

You are also welcome to make an appointment with The Learning Centre staff:

- <http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/tlc/booknow/>