## GRAMMAR: Modal Verbs and Their Meaning

### What are modal verbs?

Modals (also called **modal verbs, modal auxiliary verb**s, **modal auxiliaries**) are special verbs which behave irregularly in English. They are different from normal verbs like "work, play, visit..." They give additional information about the ***function*** of the main verb that follows it. They have a great variety of ***communicative functions***.

Here are some characteristics of modal verbs:

* They never change their form. You can't add "s", "ed", "ing"...
* They are always followed by an infinitive without "to" (e.i. the bare infinitive.)
* They are used to indicate modality allow speakers to express certainty, possibility, willingness, obligation, necessity, ability

### List of modal verbs

Here is a list of modal verbs:

|  |
| --- |
| ***can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must*** |

The verbs or expressions **dare, ought to, had better,**and **need not** behave like modal auxiliaries to a large extent and my be added to the above list

### Use of modal verbs:

Modal verbs are used to express functions such as:

1. Permission
2. Ability
3. Obligation
4. Prohibition
5. Lack of necessity
6. Advice
7. possibility
8. probability

### Examples of modal verbs

Here is a list of modals with examples:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Modal Verb** | **Expressing** | **Example** |
| **must** | Strong obligation | You must stop when the traffic lights turn red. |
| logical conclusion / Certainty | He must be very tired. He's been working all day long. |
| **must not** | prohibition | You must not smoke in the hospital. |
| **can** | ability | I can swim. |
| permission | Can I use your phone please? |
| possibility | Smoking can cause cancer. |
| **could** | ability in the past | When I was younger I could run fast. |
| polite permission | Excuse me, could I just say something? |
| possibility | It could rain tomorrow! |
| **may** | permission | May I use your phone please? |
| possibility, probability | It may rain tomorrow! |
| **might** | polite permission | Might I suggest an idea? |
| possibility, probability | I might go on holiday to Australia next year. |
| **need not** | lack of necessity/absence of obligation | I need not buy tomatoes. There are plenty of tomatoes in the fridge. |
| **should/ought to** | 50 % obligation | I should / ought to see a doctor. I have a terrible headache. |
| advice | You should / ought to revise your lessons |
| logical conclusion | He should / ought to be very tired. He's been working all day long. |
| **had better** | advice | You 'd better revise your lessons |

### Modals in the present and past:

Generally speaking modals in the past have the following form:

* modal + have + past participle

#### Example:

* **Present**:  
  You **should see** a doctor.
* **Past**:  
  You **should have seen** a doctor

Except for modals that express obligation,ability and lack of necessity:

* **Obligation**:  
  Present = I must / have to work hard. -- Past = I had to work hard.
* **Ability**:  
  Present = I can run fast. -- Past = I could run fast when I was young.
* **Lack of necessity**:  
  Present = You don't have to / needn't take your umbrella. -- Past = You didn't have to / didn't need to take your umbrella.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Modals in the Present** | **Modals in the Past** |
| Obligation | You **must / have to stop** when the traffic lights are red. | You**had to stop**. |
| Advice | You **should see** a doctor. | You **should have seen** a doctor |
| Prohibition | You **mustn't smoke** here. | You **mustn't have smoked** there. |
| Ability | I **can run**fast**.** | I **could run**fast. now I am old. |
| Certainty | He has a Rolls Royce. He **must be** very rich. He **can't be** American. His English is terrible. | He **must have been** rich. He had a big house and an expensive car. He **can't have written** that poem. He was illiterate. |
| Permission | **Can I go** out? | She **could drive** her father's car when she was only 15. |
| Possibility | It **may / can / could / might rain**. It's cloudy. | I guess it **may / can / could / might have been** Lacy on the phone. |
| Lack of necessity | You **don't have to / needn't buy** any tomatoes. There are plenty in the fridge. | You **didn't have to / didn't need to buy** tomatoes. |