



# MODALS: Theory, Analysis, Formation & Uses

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## What Are Modals?

**Modals** (also called **modal verbs**) are **auxiliary verbs** used with the base form of the main verb to express **ability, possibility, necessity, obligation, permission**, and more.

They **do not change form** (no -s, -ed, or -ing) and are always followed by the **bare infinitive** (base form of the verb without “to”).

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## Modals: Formation



### Structure:

**Subject + modal + base verb + (rest of sentence)**



### Examples:

- She **can** swim.
- They **must** study more.
- You **should** call her.



**Incorrect:** She can **to swim**. / He must **studies**.

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## Characteristics of Modal Verbs



### Feature



### Description

No -s in 3rd person	He <b>can</b> , not <i>cans</i>
No infinitive form	No <i>to must</i> , <i>to can</i>
No past participle	No <i>have canned</i> , <i>musted</i>
Followed by base verb	<b>Must go, can eat, should help</b>

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## Types of Modals and Their Uses

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### 1. Ability – *can / could / be able to*

Modal	Use	Example
can	present/future ability	She <b>can</b> play the violin.
could	past ability	He <b>could</b> swim when he was 5.
be able to	all tenses	I'll <b>be able to</b> help tomorrow.

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### 2. Permission – *can / could / may / might*

Modal	Use	Example
can	informal permission	Can I borrow your pen?
could	polite permission	Could I use your phone?
may	formal permission	May I leave early?
might	very formal/polite	Might I suggest something?

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### 3. Possibility / Probability – *may / might / could / can / must / can't*

Modal	Use	Example
may/might	less certain possibility	It <b>might</b> rain later.
could	general possibility	The road <b>could</b> be closed.
must	strong logical conclusion	He <b>must</b> be tired.
can't	negative certainty	She <b>can't</b> be serious!

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### 4. Obligation & Necessity – *must / have to / should / ought to*

Modal	Use	Example
must	personal/internal obligation	I <b>must</b> call my parents.
have to	external obligation	We <b>have to</b> wear uniforms.
should/ought to	advice or mild obligation	You <b>should</b> eat more vegetables.

 **"Must" and "have to"** are often interchangeable but have **subtle differences** in tone.

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## 5. Prohibition – *must not / can't / may not*

Modal	Use	Example
must not	strong prohibition	You <b>must not</b> smoke here.
can't	informal prohibition	You <b>can't</b> enter this room.
may not	formal prohibition	Visitors <b>may not</b> park here.

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## 6. Advice / Suggestion – *should / ought to / had better*

Modal	Use	Example
should	general advice	You <b>should</b> see a doctor.
ought to	strong advice	He <b>ought to</b> apologize.
had better	warning/advice	You <b>had better</b> leave now.

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## 7. Deduction / Assumption – *must / can't / could / might*

Modal	Use	Example
Must	logical certainty (positive)	She <b>must</b> be home by now.
can't	logical certainty (negative)	He <b>can't</b> be serious.
Might	possibility (less certain)	They <b>might</b> be on vacation.

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## 8. Habits (past) – *would / used to*

Modal	Use	Example
would	repeated past actions	We <b>would</b> go fishing every summer.
used to	past states/habits	I <b>used to</b> live in Paris.

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## Modal Verbs in Questions and Negatives

- Can you help me?
  - Should we go now?
  - You **mustn't** be late.
  - They **can't** speak French.
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## Modal Substitutes (Semi-Modals)

When modals cannot be used in all tenses, we use **semi-modals** or **equivalents**:

### Modal Alternative / Tense Substitute

can be able to (future/past)

must have to / had to

may be allowed to

shall be going to / will

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## Summary Table of Modals

Function	Modals
Ability	can, could, be able to
Permission	can, could, may, might
Possibility	may, might, could, can
Advice	should, ought to, had better
Obligation	must, have to, should
Prohibition	must not, can't, may not
Deduction	must, can't, might, could
Habit (past)	would, used to
Future Prediction	will, shall

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## Common Errors to Avoid

✗ He **musts** do it.

✓ He **must** do it.

✗ She **can to** sing.

✓ She **can** sing.

✗ They **should to** leave.

✓ They **should** leave.