

# Modal verbs (1)

# Present and future ability

\*can /can't

\*be (un)able to

E.g. Peter **can** ride a bike.

I **can't** speak Japanese.

I **can** come out with you tomorrow night

(a decision or plan made now about a future action)

Multitasking is something he'll never **be able** to do.

I **might be able to** leave early.

She **has** always **been able to** work things out.

# Past ability

\* could – general past ability

e.g. My grandmother **could** speak five languages.

\* was/were able to – specific past ability

\* managed

\* succeeded in doing sth.

Firefighters **were able to/managed to**  
save/**succeeded in** saving everybody from the  
burning house.

- could not = couldn't

Used with both general and specific past abilities

It was considered normal if children **could not read** when they went to school.

I **could not go** to the lecture yesterday.

# Present certainty and likelihood

- Present certainty

must /can't/should/shouldn't + do sth  
be doing sth

The lights are on, he **must** be at home. (I'm sure he is at home)

His car is gone, he **can't** be at home. (I'm sure he isn't at home)

There's light in his study, he **must be** working

She **can't be** travelling, her work started last week.

BUT: mustn't – only used with prohibitions

should – when we are not certain, but think there are good reasons to think so.

Ask Jessica, she **should** know it.

**Shouldn't** you **be sitting** an exam right now?

ought to – synonym to should

- will /will not = must/can't (we are certain of sth because it's what is expected.)

'There's somebody coming.' 'That'll be Mary.'

'Let's go and have a bite.' 'No, the canteen won't be open yet.'

- Present likelihood

may, might, could + do sth

be doing sth

(might and could express a smaller probability.)

We **may** go to Japan this summer. (There's a chance that we'll go.)

**BUT: don't** use **question** forms of '**may**' with this meaning!



Do you think the firm may lose money?  
(NOT May the firm lose money?)

It **could/might** rain later, but I don't really think it will.

may not/might not

Isabelle may not/might not/mightn't be at home yet. = it's possible she isn't

BUT: don't use couldn't in this meaning

Can – to express typical behaviour or general possibility.

A female crocodile **can** lay 30-40 eggs.

Roads **can** be very slippery here in winter.

# Past certainty and likelihood

- Past certainty

must/can't/couldn't have + done

been doing

She **must have missed** the bus. (I'm sure she did.)

You **must have been joking**. (I'm sure you were.)

He **can't/couldn't have said** it. (I'm sure he didn't.)

- Past likelihood

may/might/could/ have + done

been doing

Mary **may/might/could have heard** it from John.

(There's a chance that she did.)

may not/might not or mightn't have + done

been doing

BUT: not couldn't in this meaning

They **may not/mightn't have caught** the train. (May-be they didn't)

# To express that sth is quite probable

- Could/may/might + well + present or past

He **could well be** at home by now.

They **may well have lied** you about it.

She **might well be sleeping** right now.

He **may well have been waiting** for hours.

# To express unreal past situations

- Should/ought to/could have + done  
been doing

You **should have been** here an hour ago. (But you weren't.)

I **ought to have bought** that car. (But I didn't.)

I was so hungry I **could have eaten** a horse.  
(But I didn't.)

Mark **should have been standing** there with us.  
(But he wasn't.)

# Modal verbs (2)

## Obligation and necessity

### PRESENT

- \*must do
- \*have/has to do
- \*need(s) to do
- \*have/has got to do

### PAST

- \*had to do
- \*needed to do

# Absence of obligation or necessity

## PRESENT

\*do(es)n't have to do

\*do(es)n't need to

\*need not do

## PAST

\*didn't have to do

\*didn't need to do

\*needn't have done



- **need to** can be used like a regular verb using auxiliaries do/does/did etc. in negative sentences and questions and the preposition 'to' as a synonym to 'have to'

You **need to** appeal to a higher court.

Mary **doesn't need to** answer this.

**Do** they **need to** know?

Why **do** you **need to** know?

- **need** can be used like a modal verb in negative sentences and questions in present simple tense only.

He **needn't** know about it.

**Need** I say more?

# Didn't need to do and needn't have done

- Patrick didn't need to go to school last week.  
(He didn't go to school last week because there was no need)
- You needn't have bought any food, our fridge is stocked.  
(you bought the food but it was in vain)

# Strong advice. Criticism

## PRESENT

- \*should/ought to do
- \*could/might do
- \*shouldn't do

## PAST

- \*should have done
- \*ought to have done
- \*could have done
- \*might have done

# Strong advice

- Mike **ought to/ should** work harder.
- You **could/might** try something different.
- Brian **shouldn't** give in so easily.

# Criticism

- Mary **ought to have/should have** handled the situation differently.
- You **could have/might have** told me first.

# Prohibition

## PRESENT

\*mustn't

\*can't

\*am/is/are not allowed to

## PAST

\*was/were not  
allowed to

- Children **mustn't** play with matches!
- We **can't** go there without a previous appointment.
- We have never been **allowed to** use the gadget.
- Students **were not allowed** to use dictionaries at the exam.



# Past permission

- Could - only used with general permission

When we were children we **could** stay up long on New Year's Eve

- Was, were allowed to – used with specific permission.

John **was allowed to** take the exam later.