

# ENGLISH MODAL VERBS

## ACTIVITY TYPE

Reading, Writing, Grammar,  
Exercises

## LANGUAGE FOCUS

English modal verbs

## AIM

To learn and practice the English  
modal verbs

## LEVEL

Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate,

## TIME

30 Minutes

## INTRODUCTION

After going through your regular review and teacher talk, tell the students that they're going to learn the English modal verbs.

## PREPARATION

Make one copy of the worksheet for each student

## PROCEDURE

Give one copy of the worksheet to each student.  
Go through the grammar and exercises together.

# Modal verbs

## Ability

### CAN AND COULD

Can and could are modal verbs. They are sometimes called modal auxiliaries because they are generally used with another verb and help us to understand that verb.

Examples of this auxiliary use are:

I can swim

ability

Can I smoke?

permission

Could you lend me £5?

asking for something

### General characteristics of can and could

They do not add -s in the 3rd person singular:

I can swim.

He can swim.

They could all drive before I could.

He could drive before I even had a bike.

To make a question you don't have to use an auxiliary verb, just invert the subject and the modal verb:

Can you swim?

Can he swim?

Could she read when she was three?

To make a negative sentence, add not or n't to the modal verb:

I can't swim (or I cannot swim. Cannot is one word)

Can't you swim?

We couldn't finish the exam in time.

## BE ABLE TO

As said above, can and could are modal verbs, and modal verbs don't follow the normal rules for verbs. For example, they don't have an infinitive or an -ing form.

For this reason can and could are impossible to use when you need to use the infinitive, the gerund or a continuous tense (though the continuous form would be impossible anyway!).

Being modal verbs also means they don't necessarily have a form that can be used for the past or the future, though in very general terms can is used to

refer to the present and could is used to refer to the past.

When you can't use can or could, you need to use a form of be able to. This means exactly the same as can and could. Some examples:

*I'm sorry, but I won't be able to come tomorrow.*

*Being able to speak another language is very useful.*

*You should be able to do this. It's easy!*

### Tense chart

To make things clearer, have a look at the chart below. It shows when you can use can, could and be able to.

Remember that be able to can always be used, but that English speakers use can and could whenever they can. Be able to sounds more formal and not English.

present simple	can	am/are/is able to
present continuous	~~~~~	~~~~~
past simple	could	was/were able to
past continuous	~~~~~	~~~~~
present perfect	~~~~~	has/have been able to

past perfect	~~~~~	had been able to
future	~~~~~	will be able to
infinitive	~~~~~	(to) be able to
gerund	~~~~~	being able to
conditional	could	would be able to

### Notes about tenses

The chart above is only intended as a rough guide. As always with English verbs, a lot of the time the tense you use depends on what you're talking about.

For example, can can be used to refer to timetables or schedules in the future, just as the present simple is used normally:

*I can't come tomorrow, but I can come at 3 o'clock next Thursday.*

When talking about the past there's a difference between could and was/were able to: could is used in a more general sense while was/were able to is used to talk about more specific occasions:

*I could run really fast when I was younger. But then I started*

smoking and my sister was able to beat me every time we had a race.

However, when you talk about the past in the negative couldn't and wasn't/weren't able to are completely interchangeable:

Sorry, I couldn't come yesterday.

Sorry, I wasn't able to come yesterday.

The conditional forms are also interchangeable:

I could go on holiday if I had more money.

I'd be able to go on holiday if I had more money.

## MODAL VERBS OF DEDUCTION: MUST, MIGHT, COULD, CAN'T, MAY

We use modal verbs of deduction to express *degrees of certainty* about the present and the past ~ what we *are* or *are not* sure/certain about and what we think *may* or *may not* be true/possible.

1. To express *certainty*, we use **must** in the positive and **can't** in the negative.

*e.g. They must be in bed. They can't be out at this time of night.*

2. To express possibility, we use may, might, could in the positive and may not, might not (short forms not usual), in negative.

*e.g. She may be there already.*

*He may not be there yet.*

*It might not be John.*

Modal verbs of deduction with the Present Infinitive are used for expressing degree of certainty about **the present** when we are deducing and supposing about a



present event.

Certainty	He <b>must</b>					
Possibility	{				He <b>might</b>	<b>be in love</b>
					He <b>may</b>	<b>live near here</b>
					He <b>could</b>	<b>be earning a lot of money</b>
Certainty	He <b>can't</b>					

Modal verbs of deduction with the Past Participle are used for expressing degree of certainty about **the past** when we are deducing and supposing now about an event in the past.

Certainty	He <b>must</b>						
Possibility	{				He <b>might</b>	<b>have</b>	<b>been ill</b>
					He <b>may</b>		<b>gone home</b>
					He <b>could</b>		<b>been going to work</b>
Certainty	He <b>can't</b>						



## "DON'T HAVE TO" AND "MUSTN'T"

"Have to" and "must" usually mean the same thing: there is no choice about something, and you are forced to do it. However, the negatives of these two modals mean different things. "Don't have to" is different from "mustn't":

Don't  
have to

means that something is not necessary, but you can do it if you want to -- it's up to you.

"You don't have to pass the test."

*means*

"It's OK if you pass the test, but it's also OK if you don't pass it."

Mustn't

means that something is not allowed; it is forbidden, and you definitely shouldn't do it.

"You mustn't smoke in the classroom."

*means*

"Smoking is not allowed in the classroom."

# Exercises

## CAN

### EXERCISE 1.

*Write questions using “can”*

*e.g. Where are my glasses?*

*Can you see my glasses?*

1. Where's my car? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Where's the cat? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Where's the door? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Where are the flowers? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Where are my shoes? \_\_\_\_\_

### EXERCISE 2.

*Write questions using the prompt*

*e.g. a cup of coffee*

*Can I have a cup of coffee, please?*

1. a beer \_\_\_\_\_
2. some butter \_\_\_\_\_



3. some fruit \_\_\_\_\_
4. some salt \_\_\_\_\_
5. a sausage \_\_\_\_\_
6. some sugar \_\_\_\_\_

### EXERCISE 3.

*Write sentences using the prompt*

*e.g. drink coffee / smoke*

*I can drink coffee but I cannot smoke*

1. eat some fruit / eat this sausage

\_\_\_\_\_

2. remember his face / remember his name

\_\_\_\_\_

3. drive a car / drive a bus

\_\_\_\_\_

4. ride a bicycle / drive a car

\_\_\_\_\_

5. have a shower / have a bath

\_\_\_\_\_



## EXERCISE 4.

*Write short answers with can*

e.g. *Can you come alone? No, ...*

*No, I can't*

1. Can I read this book? Yes, \_\_\_\_\_
2. Can they use the computer? No, \_\_\_\_\_
3. Can I ask you a question? No, \_\_\_\_\_
4. Can you hear me? Yes. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Can I have your telephone number? No, \_\_\_\_\_
6. Can he spell his name? Yes, \_\_\_\_\_

## EXERCISE 5.

*Write true sentences about yourself using the following information.*

Speak English	run fast	swim 1km	<del>drive a</del>
<del>car</del>			
	<del>Ride a motorbike</del>		ride a horse
play the piano			

e.g. *I can drive a car*

*I can't ride a motorbike.*

1.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

## CAN + VERB OF SENSE

The human body has 5 senses; touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell. The corresponding verbs are *to feel*, *to taste*, *to see*, *to hear*, and *to smell*. These verbs are combined with *can* to tell another person what our senses are doing.

### EXERCISE 1.

*Use can and a verb of sense to complete the following sentences.*

e.g. *I can smell gas! The oven hasn't been turned off properly.*

1. I \_\_\_\_\_ with my eyes.
2. I \_\_\_\_\_ with my nose.
3. I \_\_\_\_\_ with my ears.
4. I \_\_\_\_\_ with my tongue.
5. I \_\_\_\_\_ something when I touch it or it touches me.

### EXERCISE 2.

*Complete the following sentences by using can/can't and the correct verb of sense.*

e.g. *I can taste salt when I swim in the sea.*



1. When I sit in Hyde Park, I \_\_\_\_\_ the birds chirping in the trees.
2. If Trevor walks in the dark he \_\_\_\_\_ anything.
3. From the top of the Empire State building I \_\_\_\_\_ the skyline of New York.
4. She \_\_\_\_\_ the roses because she is ill and has a runny nose.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ you \_\_\_\_\_ the heat of the sun on your skin?
6. This apple pie is very good! I \_\_\_\_\_ the cinnamon in it.
7. There is so much noise here that I \_\_\_\_\_ what you are saying.
8. I \_\_\_\_\_ burning! Is the cake still baking in the oven?
9. Her arm is asleep. She \_\_\_\_\_ anything in her fingers.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ you \_\_\_\_\_ the rosemary I put in this recipe?

## MAYBE + WILL

### *EXPLANATION*

*Maybe* is an adverb and it can be considered a synonym of *perhaps*. It transmits the idea of possibility, the idea that something is probable, that something can happen.

### EXERCISE 1

e.g. They (to like) her.

*Maybe they'll like her, maybe they won't.*

1. She (to tell) her.

---

2. He (to ask) her out.

---

3. They (to go) to the seaside.

---

4. She (to marry) Peter.

---

5. It (to explode).

---

6. We (to sing) together.

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7. You (to go) to London next week.

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8. They (to have) children.

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9. Steve (to win) the race.

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10. You (to pass) your Level Test.

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## MIGHT AND MUST

We use **must** when we are sure that something is true.

*e.g. That French restaurant over there must be very good. It's always full of people.*

We use **might** when we are sure that something is possible.

### EXERCISE 1.

**Complete the sentences with “must” or “might”.**

*e.g. She might have arrived. I'm not sure.*

*The doorbell has just rung. I'm expecting my mother now, so it must be her.*

1. We haven't got enough food, we \_\_\_\_\_ go shopping.
2. I don't have any plans for tonight, so I \_\_\_\_\_ go to the theatre this evening.
3. My room is dirty. I \_\_\_\_\_ clean it.
4. Paul is not at home, he \_\_\_\_\_ be working.
5. I \_\_\_\_\_ see you tomorrow, but I'm not sure, because I \_\_\_\_\_ have to go to Frankfurt on business.
6. She \_\_\_\_\_ go to the bank today. She hasn't got any money.
7. I'm not sure but for my holiday I \_\_\_\_\_ go to Spain.

8. It's a fantastic movie. You \_\_\_\_\_ see it!
9. It's cloudy. It \_\_\_\_\_ rain.
10. If you want to go to university you \_\_\_\_\_ pass the last exam!
11. Where is Ann? We have a meeting now! She \_\_\_\_\_ be in her office.
12. What happened to Peter? I thought he would be at home by now, he promised that he would be here by 8.30. He \_\_\_\_\_ have had an accident!

## MUST/CAN'T /MIGHT

### EXERCISE 1.

*Use MUST CAN'T or MIGHT*

e.g. *She speaks Italian with English accent. She might be Irish*

1. She has been studying all day. She.....be very tired.
2. Your pub .....be good. It's usually full of people.
3. You haven't lived in Rome for long . You.....know many people.
4. He always wears a uniform. He ..... be a nurse
5. Mark isn't at work today. He.....be sleeping.
6. Jim knows a lot about literature. He.....read a lot.
7. Robert is in a very difficult situation. It.....be easy for him.
8. Their restaurant .....be very good. It's often empty.
9. Mary failed her exam. She ..... have studied very much
10. Robert is a little pale. He ..... have health problems

### EXERCISE 2.

*Use the words in brackets to write sentences with MUST HAVE*

1. I haven't seen my neighbours for ages. (They / go away)

.....

2. I can't find my glasses. (I /leave/ them in my office yesterday)

.....

3. They knew everything about our holiday in France. ( They / listen / to our conversation)

.....

4. Tom has rung the doorbell several times but nobody has answered .  
(They/ go out)

.....

5. I've lost my keys. (I / drop / them somewhere)

.....

## COULD – BE ABLE TO

### EXERCISE 1.

*Complete the sentences by using the correct form of could or be able to.*

*e.g. I could run very fast when I was a schoolboy.*

1. Tom \_\_\_\_\_ play football very well some years ago.
2. Jenny was an excellent player but that day Susan \_\_\_\_\_  
beat her.
2. Ask me about your problem. I should \_\_\_\_\_ give you a  
hand.
3. My secretary \_\_\_\_\_ type 100 words a minute .
4. His father \_\_\_\_\_ speak five languages.
5. My brother \_\_\_\_\_ sing very well and studied to become an  
opera singer.
6. During the flight, the pilot had a heart attack. None of the  
passengers \_\_\_\_\_ pilot a plane but Mary \_\_\_\_\_ land safely.
7. Did you enjoy the concert? Oh... unfortunately I \_\_\_\_\_ hear  
very well.
9. Jodie \_\_\_\_\_ repair cars, so she \_\_\_\_\_ start  
the engine again after the accident.
10. As a child, Sally \_\_\_\_\_ write with her left hand.

## DEDUCTIONS ABOUT PRESENT AND PAST ACTIONS

### EXERCISE 1.

*Complete the sentences by putting in **must**, **may** or **might**.*

*e.g. You've been working all day. You must be very tired.*

1. James isn't answering the phone. He \_\_\_\_\_ be out.
2. "I can't find Tom. Have you seen him?" – "He \_\_\_\_\_ be in the canteen".
3. It's very cloudy. It \_\_\_\_\_ rain.
4. "Whose pen is this?" – "I don't know. It \_\_\_\_\_ belong to Maggie".
5. That pub \_\_\_\_\_ be very good. It's always full of people.
6. "Where's Jack?" – "He \_\_\_\_\_ be in his office".
7. Don't make too much noise. You \_\_\_\_\_ wake the baby.
8. You didn't have lunch. You \_\_\_\_\_ be hungry.
9. Jim's work \_\_\_\_\_ be very boring. He does the same things every day.
10. "Who is that girl with Bob?" – "Ask Sheila. She \_\_\_\_\_ know.

## EXERCISE 2.

*Read the situations and use the words in brackets to write sentences with **must have, may have and might have**.*

*e.g. I can't find my keys anywhere.*

*(I / leave / them / at work)    I might have left them at work.*

1. It's 6.30. Sarah was supposed to meet us at 6.00.

(Something / delay / her).

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2. Susan and Paul are not at home.

(They / go / away / for the weekend).

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3. A woman phoned for you, but she didn't give her name.

(She / be / Emma).

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