

# MODAL VERBS

## USES

### CAN

- **Ability:** I can drive. She can't swim. Can you ski?
- **Possibility / impossibility:** I can't come. When can you start work?  
I can meet you at nine.
- **Permission:** You can come in now. Can I use your phone? You can't smoke here.
- **Requests:** Can you help me? Can you carry this suitcase?

### COULD

- **General ability in the past:** I could read when I was three. My parents couldn't speak English.
- **Possibility / impossibility:** It could be true.
- **Requests:** Could you post this letter for me? Could you shut the door, please?
- **Suggestions / advice:** You could go to bed early. We could go for a walk.

### WILL / SHALL:

- **Make predictions:** You'll be famous. There will be a new ice age.
- **Make offers:** I'll carry that for you. Shall I pay for it?
- **Make requests:** Will you pass the salt please? Will you shut the window, please?

### WOULD

- **Make offers:** Would you like a drink? Would you like to come to a party?
- **Make requests:** Would you give me a lift? Would you carry this for me?
- **Talk about past habits:** When I was young, I would go out every night.

### SHOULD / OUGHT TO

- **Talk about obligation / duty:** You should / ought to tell the police. You shouldn't smoke in here.
- **Give advice:** You should / ought to go to bed. You shouldn't / oughtn't to worry so much.

- **Make predictions:** They should be here soon. He should win the match easily.

## **MUST**

- **Obligation / prohibition:** You must pay for the damage. You mustn't drive so fast.
- **Necessity:** I must go now. We must get up early tomorrow.
- **Certainty / predictions:** Look at their house; they must be rich. (Only in affirmative).

## **HAVE TO**

- **Obligation / duty:** She has to wear a uniform. I have to write three essays a week.
- **Past / future necessity:** We had to walk home. You'll have to buy some new clothes.

## **MAY / MIGHT**

- **Future possibility:** It might / may break. He may / might not pass the exam.
- **Polite requests:** May I come in? May we go now?
- **Permission:** You may smoke if you want to.

## **NEED**

- **lack of necessity:** You needn't shout; I can hear you.

## **MODAL VERBS WITH PERFECT INFINITIVES**

### **SUBJECT - MODAL VERB - HAVE - PAST PARTICIPLE**

- **MIGHT / MAY / COULD HAVE** for past possibility:

It's not very late; They may not have gone to bed.

- **MUST HAVE** for past deductions / certainty:

He's not here. He must have gone.

- **CAN'T HAVE** for past impossibility:

The exam was easy; she can't have failed it.

- **SHOULD / SHOULDN'T HAVE** for past mistakes:

We should have left early. You shouldn't have driven so fast.

- **NEEDN'T HAVE** for lack of necessity in the past:
- You needn't have run; you are not late.

Note the **difference** in meaning between **needn't have** and **didn't need to**:

He needn't have done it (it wasn't necessary for him to do it, but he did).

He didn't need to do it (It wasn't necessary for him to do it. Perhaps he did it, perhaps he didn't).