

Lesson 34

Modal Verbs – 1

This is the first of 3 lessons on modal verbs.

Here's what we'll be covering:

- What is a modal verb?
- 6 Key rules for using modal verbs
- How to talk about ability, make requests & give advice

And we'll do a few of practice activities.

What is a modal verb?

A modal verb is a type of auxiliary verb and is used with the main verb to give more information.

Modal verbs are also known as helping verbs because they help the main verb by indicating such things as possibility, obligation or ability not expressed by the main verb itself.

Common modal verbs include:

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

The English language also contains some expressions called semi-modals. They fulfil many of the same functions as modals but don't follow the same set of rules.

Examples of semi-modals include:

- able to
- ought to
- had better
- have to
- need to
- got to

We'll be learning how to use these as well.

Here are some examples of how modal verbs are used to help the main verb.

- It **might** rain later today.
(**might** tells us that there's a probability that it will rain later)
- Stefan **can** walk with crutches.
(**can** tells us about Stefan's ability to walk with crutches)
- Yes, you **may** have some more pudding.
(**may** is used to give permission to have another helping of pudding)

6 Key rules

Modal verbs behave differently to other verbs and there are 6 rules you need to learn.

Rule 1: Modal verbs have only one form. They do not change in form to make different tenses.

Rule 2: You can't use two modal verbs together.

So, you can't say,

✗ I ~~may shall~~...

✗ I ~~can should~~...

Rule 3: You can't use modal verbs with other helping verbs such as **be**, **do** and **have** because they are already serving as the helping verb supporting the main verb.

Rule 4: Never use **to** between a modal verb and the main verb.

This is because the main verb used with a modal verb is always the bare infinitive, without 'to'.

So, we wouldn't say,

✗ They might ~~to~~ come over later.

We would say,

✓ They might come over later.

This is a common error, so take care.

Rule 5: The negative form of a modal verb is made by adding **not** immediately after it.

In speech and informal writing, we generally use the contracted form of the negative.

Positive form	Negative form	Contracted negative form
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • could • would • should • can • will • may • shall • might • must 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • could not • would not • should not • cannot • will not • may not • shall not • might not • must not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • couldn't • wouldn't • shouldn't • can't • won't • (no contracted form) • shan't • mightn't • mustn't

Rule 6: There are two ways to form a question using modal verbs.

1. You can form a question by starting the sentence with a modal verb. For example,

- **Can** I borrow your cake recipe book?
- **Will** you pass me the newspaper, please?
- **Should** I wear the red dress or the blue dress to the party?

2. You can put a question word before the modal verb. For example,

- **How can** I mend this broken vase?
- **When will** you give me your answer?
- **Where would** you recommend I stay when I visit Barcelona?

How to talk about ability – the present

Can & can't

Now that we know the rules governing modal verbs, let's look at how we use them to talk about some specific situations. In this lesson we're going to focus on ability, making requests and giving advice. We'll start with ability.

To talk about ability in the present we use **can** and **can't**. In the positive, negative and question forms we could say,

- He **can** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
- He **can't** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
- **Can** he swim 100 metres in under a minute?

Able to

As an alternative to **can** and **could**, we can use **able to**, one of the semi-modal verbs we identified earlier.

Here are the sentences we've just look at again with the alternative versions using **able to**.

- He **can** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
He is **able to** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
- He **can't** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
He isn't **able to** swim 100 metres in under a minute.
- Can he swim 100 metres in under a minute?
Is he **able to** swim 100 metres in under a minute?

Practice

Practice using **can** and **able to** by creating some sentences of your own.

Practice

Say some things that you can and can't do using these sentence forms.

1. I can...
2. I can't...
3. I am able to...
4. I'm not able to...

How to talk about ability – the past

Could & couldn't

To talk about ability in the past, we use **could** and **couldn't**. In the positive, negative and question forms we could say,

- They **could** see a ship sailing into the harbour.
- They **couldn't** see a ship sailing into the harbour.
- **Could** they see a ship sailing into the harbour?

Able to

When using **able to** to talk about the past, we put the past form of 'to be' in front of it – was/wasn't/were/weren't. For example,

- I was able to rescue the cat from the tree.
- He was so surprised that he wasn't able to speak.
- Were they able to come to an agreement?
- They weren't able to sell their house for the price they wanted?

In some situations, **could** and **able to** are not interchangeable as in the first sentence.

✗ I could rescue the cat from the tree.

✓ I was able to rescue the cat from the tree.

How to talk about ability – the future

To talk about the ability to do something in the future, the only option is to use **be able to** with **will** or **won't**.

This is another reason why you should learn to use **able to** when learning about modal verbs.

Here are some sample sentences that talk about the future.

- When I visit my home town next month, I will be able to catch up with some old friends.
- I have a meeting this evening so won't be able to drive you to football practice.
- Will you be able to pick me up after work today?

Practice

Practice using **can**, **could** and **able to** by completing these sentences with the correct verb form. Watch out for the negative sentences.

Practice

can could able to

1. He wasn't.....finish cutting the lawn before the rain started.
2. I'm sure I.....finish my essay by the weekend.
3. She get her car to start this morning.
4. Doug.....find his glasses anywhere.
5. When.....we go the beach again?

Scroll down for the answers.

Answers

1. He wasn't **able to** finish cutting the lawn before the rain started.
2. I'm sure I **can** finish my essay by the weekend.
3. She **couldn't** get her car to start this morning.

Answer 4 could be either the present or past form.

4. Doug **can't** find his glasses anywhere. / Doug **couldn't** find his glasses anywhere.
5. When **can** we go to the beach again?

How to make requests

The three modal verbs we use for making requests are **can**, **could** and **would**.

The one we choose will generally depend on how formal we want our language to be. Obviously, if we are making a request, our sentence will be a question.

informal	Can you pass me the salt?
more formal	Could you help me with my presentation?
very formal	Would you be able to direct me to the nearest chemist?

How to ask for & give advice

Finally in this lesson, we'll learn how to use modal verbs to ask for and give advice.

Asking for advice

To ask for advice, we use **should**. There are several different question structures we can use to ask for advice.

We can start with a questions word. For example,

- Where **should** we hang this picture?
- What **should** I wear to my interview?
- Who **should** I ask to go to the prom with me?

Sometimes, we want advice on two possible options. For this situation, we use **should** with **or**. For example,

- **Should** I dye my hair blonde or brunette?
- **Should** I book the meal for 7.00 p.m. or 7.30 p.m.?
- I think my son has broken his ankle. **Should** I call an ambulance or drive him to A&E?

We often use the phrase '**Do you think...?**' when asking for advice. For example,

- There's a new manager role coming up at work. Do you think I **should** apply?
- The kids want a puppy. Do you think we **should** get one?
- Do you think I **should** add more seasoning to this stew?

Giving advice – should & could

To give advice, we can use **should** and also **could**.

Should is generally used when giving a strong recommendation, while **could** is used more for suggesting possibilities. For example,

Q: My dad has pains in his chest. Should I give him a painkiller?

A: No, you should call an ambulance right away? (strong recommendation)

Q: I'm having trouble making friends since moving location. What do you think I should do?

A: You could join a walking club as you'd meet people who share your love of hiking? (suggest possibility)

Giving advice – ought to & had better

Two other expressions that are regularly used to give strong advice are semi-modals **ought to** and **had better**.

Ought to is generally used to indicate duty, correctness or moral obligation. For example,

- I found a wallet on the pavement outside my house. I ought to take it to the police station.
- I'm really disappointed with your behaviour. You ought to know better.
- We ought to leave soon or we'll be late for the performance.
- The kids ought to be in bed by now.

Had better is also used to give strong recommendations as well as warnings. Note that I've used the contracted form in some of these examples.

- You'**d better** not leave your luggage unattended or the security guard might take it away.
- I'd like to have a drink with our meal so we **had better** take a taxi to the restaurant.
- It's freezing outside. You'**d better** wrap up warm.
- I heard a noise outside. I **had better** check it out.

Practice

Practice using **ought to** and **had better** by completing these sentences.

Practice

ought to had better

1. You've really upset Taru. You.....apologise.
2. The sun is strong today so we wear sunscreen.
3. Whoever painted graffiti on the school be ashamed of themselves.
4. The swimming pool gets very busy by 10 a.m. on a Saturday so Igo early.

Answers

Here are my answers. Sentences 1, 2 and 4 could have the alternative answer but the words I've used best fit the context.

1. You've really upset Taru. You **ought to** apologise.
2. The sun is strong today so we **had better** wear sunscreen.
3. Whoever painted graffiti on the school **ought to** be ashamed of themselves.
4. The swimming pool gets very busy by 10 a.m. on a Saturday so I **had better** go early.

Summary

In the next lesson, we're going to look at some more situations where it's common to use modal verbs. Before we move on, here's a summary of today's lesson.

1. What is a modal verb?
2. 6 Key rules
3. How to talk about ability, make requests & give advice
4. Practice activities

