

## Modal Auxiliary Verbs: Form And Meaning

### Form

- As auxiliary verbs, modals are always placed before the main verb.
- As auxiliary verbs, modals are used to form questions and negatives:  
*Laura **should practice** the piano this afternoon.* (affirmative sentence)  
*Laura **should not/shouldn't** practice the piano this afternoon.* (negative sentence)  
*Should Laura **practice** the piano this afternoon?* (question)
- Unlike the other auxiliary verbs (*have, be* and *do*), modals are never used on their own as the main verb: ~~*Kathy must her class.*~~
- Unlike the other auxiliary verbs, neither the modal auxiliary nor the main verb that follows is conjugated. Students should pay particular attention to the third person singular conjugation (no final s): ~~*Kathy must attends her class.*~~

Modal conjugation	
<i>I <b>should/should not</b> exercise more.</i>	<i>We <b>can/can't</b> lend you the money.</i>
<i>You <b>must/must not</b> listen in class.</i>	<i>You <b>will/won't</b> receive the scholarship.</i>
<i>He, she, it <b>might/might not</b> arrive on time.</i>	<i>They <b>could/couldn't</b> start their car today.</i>

### General meaning

The modal auxiliary verbs (*may, might, shall, should, will, would, can, could, and must*) are grounded in the present and add the speaker's or writer's interpretation of the main verb of a sentence. Most modals can express more than one meaning; however, the context of a sentence or discussion guides the reader or listener to the correct interpretation. Here are some common uses of modals:

Extra meaning added to the main verb	Example
No modal used, purely factual	<i>Maisie walks to school.</i>
Ability/possibility or lack thereof	<i>Maisie <b>can (can't)</b> walk to school.</i>
Ability/possibility or lack thereof, distant in time (past or future)	<i>Maisie <b>could (couldn't)</b> walk to school when she was young. She <b>could</b> come tomorrow.</i>
Less than 50% certainty	<i>She <b>could/may/might (may not/might not)</b> walk to school.</i>

Advisability	<i>She <b>should (shouldn't)</b> walk to school.</i>
100% certainty in the future	<i>She <b>will (won't)</b> walk to school.</i>
A condition	<i>Maisie <b>would/could (wouldn't/couldn't)</b> walk to school if she lived in Lennoxville.</i>
Past habit or repeated action	<i>When Maisie was young, she <b>would/wouldn't</b> walk to school.</i>
Obligation	<i>She <b>must</b> walk to school.</i>
Prohibition	<i>She <b>must not</b> walk to school.</i>

## Modals used in social contexts

Some modal verbs are used to indicate register in social situations. Register is defined as the level of formality of language; in other words, word choice depends upon the person who is being addressed, the social situation in which the interaction occurs, and the form of the language used, either spoken or written.<sup>1</sup> For example, you would likely not address your grandmother the same way you address your best friend, you might address your favorite professor differently in the classroom than you would if you met them on the street, and you would employ more formal language in an academic essay than in your text messages.

Modal verbs are used to indicate register when making polite requests for permission (with the pronoun *I* as subject) and polite requests (with the pronoun *you* as subject).

	Polite requests for permission (the pronoun <i>I</i> as subject)	Polite requests (the pronoun <i>you</i> as subject)
<b>Friendly</b> (same social standing, an informal situation, or a routine request)  ↓  <b>Formal</b> (different social standing, a formal situation, or an important request)	<b>Can</b> <i>I open the window now?</i>  <i>(Will is not used.)</i>	<b>Can</b> <i>you let me know?</i>  <i>Will you let me know?</i>
	<b>Could*</b> <i>I hand in my paper tomorrow?</i>	<b>Could*</b> <i>you let me know?</i>
	<b>May**</b> <i>I hand in my paper late?</i>	<i>(May is not used.)</i>
	<i>(Would is not used.)</i>	<b>Would</b> <i>you let me know?</i>
	<b>Would</b> <i>you mind if I handed in my paper next week?</i>	<b>Would</b> <i>you mind letting me know?</i>

\**could* – more commonly used than *may*, used both formally and informally (When unsure, *could* is a good choice.)

\*\**may* – once considered more “grammatically correct” than *can* or *could*

Material quoted from:

<sup>1</sup> Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL course* (2nd ed.). Heinle & Heinle. (pp. 23-24).

