

Modal Auxiliary Verbs: Past Time And Easily Confused Modals

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.

For basic information on general modal use, refer the BU Writing Centre *Modal Auxiliary Verbs: Meaning And Form* handout.

Modals with past time reference

Although all uses of modal auxiliaries are grounded in the present, some modals can be used with past time reference when the speaker or writer interprets a past event. In these cases, the modal auxiliary is followed by the unconjugated perfect form of the main verb (*have* + past participle).

Reaction to "Jonas was driving 10 kilometers over the speed limit and got a ticket last night."	Meaning (as the speaker or writer interprets a past event)
<i>He could have kept an eye on his speedometer.</i>	The speaker retroactively sees this as a suggestion .
<i>He should have been driving more slowly. He shouldn't have been driving so fast.</i>	The speaker retroactively sees these statements as good advice .
<i>He could/may/might have missed seeing the speed limit sign.</i>	The speaker feels that there is less than a 50% certainty/probability that he missed the sign.
<i>At that speed, he should/should not have gotten a ticket.</i>	The speaker feels strongly (90% certainty/probability) about who would get a ticket at Jonas' speed.
<i>He must have been distracted at the time.</i>	The speaker knows that Jonas is a careful driver, so there is a 95% certainty/probability he was distracted at the time.
<i>He can't/couldn't have been speeding!</i>	The speaker knows that Jonas is a slow driver; it is impossible that he would have been speeding.
<i>I would have liked to see that!</i>	This is the speaker's unfulfilled wish .

<i>He would not have gotten the ticket if he had been driving slowly.</i>	This is an unreal conditional sentence: He was driving too fast, so he did get a ticket.
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Modal confusion: Must versus have to (necessity/obligation and prohibition)

In their positive forms, *must* (the modal auxiliary) and *have to* (the main verb *have* followed by the infinitive form of a verb) express necessity/obligation. The following pairs of sentences have the same meaning:

*You **must finish** your homework before you leave.*
*You **have* to finish** your homework before you leave.*

*She **must finish** her homework before she leaves.*
*She **has* to finish** her homework before she leaves.*

*Note that *have* is conjugated, unlike the modal auxiliary *must*.

The confusion arrives because their negative forms have different meanings:

*You **must not* use** ChatGPT to write your biography.* (prohibition)
*You **don't have to use** ChatGPT to write your biography.* (lack of necessity, a choice)

Another source of confusion is that *must* is not used to express past necessity/obligation; in these cases, *had to* is used:

~~*He **must renewed** his license by last Friday.*~~
*He **had to renew** his license by last Friday.*

Modal confusion: Expressing degrees of certainty and impossibility

All of the modal auxiliaries are used in multiple contexts which can lead to confusion. Although the positive forms of the modals used to express certainty are commonly used, *can't* and *couldn't* when used to express impossibility might be confusing to some students.

Modals	Degree of certainty	Where is Eva?
could, may, might, might not*	< 50% certainty	<i>I don't know where Eva is. She could/may/might be in class.</i>
should	90% certainty	<i>It's Wednesday morning, so she should be in class now.</i>
must	95% certainty	<i>She has an exam now. She must be in class.</i>
will	100% certainty (future only)	<i>Tomorrow at this time, she will be in class.</i>
can't, couldn't	impossibility	<i>It's Sunday morning, so she can't/couldn't be in class. She can't/couldn't possibly still be sleeping!</i>

**Might not* is rarely contracted to *mightn't* in North American English.

