8

Modal Verbs

The modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must*, plus the semi-modals *ought to, need, dare, used to* and phrasal alternatives (*have to, be able to, be allowed to, be supposed to*).

Key Point

Modals share four grammatical properties: (1) no third-person *-s* (*she can*, not ✗ *she cans*); (2) followed by the bare infinitive (*must go*, not ✗ *must to go*); (3) questions and negatives without *do* (*Can you. . . ? You mustn't. . .*); (4) no infinitives or participles — to fill the gaps, use substitutes: *be able to* (for *can*), *have to* (for *must*): *I'd like to* ***be able to*** *ski. She's* ***had to*** *work late all week.*

8.1 Ability: *can, could, be able to*

- Present: *She* ***can*** *speak four languages.*
- Past general ability: *He* ***could*** *run fast as a boy.*
- Past single achievement: use *was able to / managed to*, not *could*: *The fire spread quickly, but everyone* ***was able to*** *escape.* (✗ *everyone could escape*) In the negative, both work: *I* ***couldn't*** *open the jar.*
- Future: *will be able to*: *You'****ll be able to*** *walk on it in six weeks.*

8.2 Permission: *can, could, may, might*

Can *I leave early?* (neutral) — ***Could*** *I possibly leave early?* (more polite) — ***May*** *I leave early?* (formal). Granting/refusing: *You* ***can/may*** *use my desk. You* ***can't/ may not*** *park here.*

8.3 Requests, offers, suggestions

- Requests: ***Can/Could/Would*** *you help me?* (*could/would* = more polite)
- Offers: ***Can/Shall*** *I carry that?* ***Would*** *you like some tea?*
- Suggestions: ***Shall*** *we start? We* ***could*** *try the new restaurant. You* ***might want to*** *check the figures.*

8.4 Obligation and necessity: *must, have to, need*

must	obligation the speaker imposes or endorses: *I **must** finish this tonight. You **must** wear a helmet.*
have to	external obligation (rules, circumstances): *I **have to** wear a suit at work. She **has to** catch the 6:30 train.*
mustn't	prohibition: *You **mustn't** tell anyone.* (= don't do it)
don't have to / needn't	absence of obligation: *You **don't have to** come if you're busy.* (= it's not necessary)

Common Error

mustn't ≠ *don't have to*. *You **mustn't** pay* = paying is forbidden. *You **don't have to** pay* = paying is optional. Confusing these reverses your meaning entirely.

Past obligation uses *had to* (there is no past of *must* in this sense): *We **had to** show our passports.*

8.5 Advice: *should, ought to, had better*

*You **should** see a doctor. We **ought to** apologize. You'**d better** hurry (or you'll miss the train — stronger, warns of consequences).* Negative: *shouldn't, ought not to, had better not*.

8.6 Degrees of certainty (epistemic modality)

Modals also grade how sure the speaker is:

Certainty	Example
must (sure it's true)	*The lights are on — they **must** be home.*
will (confident prediction)	*That **will** be the postman.*
should (probable)	*The parcel **should** arrive tomorrow.*
may / might / could (possible)	*She **may** be at lunch. It **might** rain. This **could** be the answer.*
can't (sure it's false)	*He **can't** be forty — he looks twenty-five!*

Key Point

The opposite of epistemic *must* is *can't*, not *mustn't*: *They **must** be out* ↔ *They **can't** be out.*

8.7 Modal + perfect: judgments about the past

Modal + *have* + past participle looks back at past events:

- *must have done*: confident deduction — *The ground is wet; it **must have rained**.*
- *can't/couldn't have done*: confident rejection — *She **can't have taken** the car; she doesn't drive.*
- *may/might/could have done*: possibility — *He **might have missed** the train.*
- *should have done*: the right thing was not done (criticism or regret) — *You **should have told** me earlier.*
- *needn't have done*: it was done, but was unnecessary — *You **needn't have brought** a gift.*
- *would have done*: unrealized past outcome (see Chapter 9) — *I **would have helped**, but I wasn't there.*

Common Error

In speech, *should have* weakens to *should've* — never write ✗ *should of, could of, would of*: → ✓ *should have, could have, would have.*

Exercises

Exercise 8.1 Choose the modal

Choose the best option.

1. You (mustn't / don't have to) shout — I can hear you perfectly.
2. Visitors (mustn't / don't have to) feed the animals. It's forbidden.
3. I (could / was able to) finally fix the printer after two hours.
4. That (can't / mustn't) be Tom at the door; he's in Berlin.
5. We (should / must) leave now, or we'll hit traffic. (advice)

Exercise 8.2 Modal + perfect

Rewrite the idea using a modal perfect (*must/might/can't/should/needn't have* + participle).

1. I'm sure Laura forgot the meeting.
2. It was a mistake for you to lend him money.
3. It's possible that they took an earlier flight.
4. It was unnecessary for you to print the documents (but you did).
5. It's impossible that Marco wrote this — it's not his handwriting.

Exercise 8.3 Error correction

Correct one error in each sentence.

1. She cans speak Russian fluently.
2. You must to submit the form by Friday.
3. I would of called you, but my phone died.
4. Do you can help me with this box?
5. Yesterday I must work until midnight.