



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Modal verbs

Modal verbs (can, could, may, might, must, should, will, would) are helping verbs that add meaning such as ability, possibility, permission, advice and obligation. They are always followed by the base verb with no to and never take -s: she can swim, you should go, it may rain.

What to know

What modal verbs are and how they work

A modal verb comes before another verb and changes its meaning. The main modals are **can, could, may, might, must, should, will, would** and **shall**. Phrases such as **have to** and **ought to** do similar jobs.

- *She can speak three languages.* · ability
- *Cities should invest in public transport.* · advice

Ability and possibility

Use **can** for present ability and **could** for general ability in the past: I could swim when I was six. For one particular past success, use **was able to**: I was able to finish the report on time.

Obligation, advice and permission

Use **must** or **have to** for obligation. **Must** often shows the speaker's own opinion (I must study more). **Have to** usually shows a rule from outside (Students have to wear a uniform). In writing, **must** sounds strong and is best for rules and urgent needs.

Must not and do not have to are different

This is one of the most important contrasts. **Must not** means it is forbidden: You must not use a phone in the exam room. **Do not have to** means it is not necessary, but allowed: You do not have to bring a pen, because one is provided.

Would and shall

Use **would** for polite requests (Would you mind opening the window?), for imaginary situations (If I had more time, I would learn Italian) and for repeated actions in the past (We would visit my grandmother every Sunday). In reported speech, **would** is the past of **will**: She said she would call.

Exercises

1. You _____ wear a seat belt. It is the law in the UK.
 - a. can
 - b. must
 - c. might
2. Students _____ wear a uniform at this school; it is optional.
 - a. don't have to
 - b. mustn't

c. can't

3. Scientists are not yet sure, but pollution _____ cause serious health problems in children.

a. shall

b. may

c. must

4. She has not answered her phone. She _____ be asleep.

a. shall

b. ought

c. might

5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Everyone (2) should to (3) reduce plastic (4) use.

6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) My brother (2) cans (3) speak three (4) languages.

7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): You / have / should / harder. / to / studied

8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): in / public / transport. / must / to / Cities / invest

9. Correct this: *You must to submit the form before Friday.*

10. Correct this: *He can speaks four languages.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/modal-verbs/practice/

IELTS tip. In Writing Task 2, use should for your main recommendation and may or could for possible results. In Speaking, try That must be difficult, It might be a good idea and I should have done more to show a natural range of modal meanings.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Modal verbs

AIM	Learners choose the right modal for ability, possibility, obligation and advice, form modals correctly, and use hedging in writing.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Show a picture of an unfamiliar object (such as an old tool). Learners guess what it is using *may*, *might*, *could* and *must*, and the class votes.

Lesson steps

1. Present the three form rules (base verb, no -s, no do) with a short error-spotting task.
2. Introduce the certainty scale on the board and place *may*, *might*, *could*, *must* and *can't* along it.
3. Contrast *must not* and *do not have to* with real school or workplace rules.
4. Teach modal + *have* + past participle through short regret stories (I should have...).
5. Learners rewrite three strong claims from a Task 2 essay using hedging modals.

Extension

Learners write a short advice leaflet for new international students using *should*, *must* and *have to*, and swap for peer review.

Answer key

1. b) *must*. A legal obligation needs *must* (or *have to*). *Can* and *might* do not show obligation.
2. a) *don't have to*. *Don't have to* means it is not necessary. *Mustn't* and *can't* mean it is forbidden.
3. b) *may*. *May* hedges the claim as possible. *Must* would claim it is certain, which does not fit when scientists are not sure, and *shall* does not fit at all.
4. c) *might*. *Might* shows possibility. *Shall* and *ought* do not fit a guess about the present.
5. Part 2: *should to* → **should**. After a modal, use the base verb with no *to*.
6. Part 2: *can's* → **can**. Modals never take -s: he *can*.
7. You should have studied harder. For a past regret use *should* + *have* + past participle.
8. Cities must invest in public transport. A modal is followed by the base verb without *to*.
9. You must submit the form before Friday. *Must* is followed by the base verb with no *to*.
10. He can speak four languages. After a modal, the verb has no -s.

Questions learners often ask

What are the modal verbs in English? The main modals are can, could, may, might, must, should, will, would and shall. Ought to, have to and need to are often grouped with them because they have similar meanings.

What is the difference between must and have to? Must often shows the speaker's opinion or a strong need, while have to usually shows a rule from outside. In the negative they differ more: must not means forbidden, do not have to means not necessary.

Why do modal verbs not take -s? Modals are special helping verbs with one form for every subject. So it is she can, he must and it may, never she cans.

Which modals should I use in IELTS Writing Task 2? Use should to give recommendations and may, might or could to show careful possibilities. Use must and will for points you want to state firmly.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman.

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