

LEARN YOUR MODAL VERBS



MODAL VERB	USE	EXAMPLES
Present & Future		
can / can't	Present ABILITY Informal permission Informal polite request	Can / can't swim very well You can use my car tomorrow Can I borrow your pen?
be able to	Present ABILITY (formal)	You are able to drive the biggest motorcar.
will/can't be able to	Future ABILITY (I will be able to swim by the end of the course)	(I will be able to use your car holiday)
shall	polite question to make a suggestion	Shall I open the window?
may/might	Formal permission	You may leave the room.
might / may	Polite request (only with I or we)	May I borrow your pen?
could / can	Present or future POSSIBILITY	I may go to the beach next month He might not get to bed It can't be true to go already!
can't	Present logical DENIAL , DISLIK Believe or guess something is impossible (to say something is true (not meant to))	He must be on holiday / He won't be at the gym (can't be)
ought (not) to	Give ADVICE and make recommendations (present)	You ought (not) to exercise it You should (not) exercise it
had better (not) do	To give very strong ADVICE or make threats (present)	You'd better go or we'll be late You'd better not drink any alcohol before
have to	OBLIGATION (present)	You must be late
must	OBLIGATION (present)	You have to do it every day
needn't	NO OBLIGATION (present)	You needn't buy any special equipment
don't have to	NO OBLIGATION (present)	She doesn't have to join a gym
need (without do)	Negative and interrogative (present)	I need some salt / I don't need anything
need to	In affirmative to express necessity	I need to get a job (I needn't a job)
mustn't	PROHIBITION	You mustn't smoke / you mustn't take drugs
must & have to - their meanings are similar in the affirmative. They are completely different in the negative (mustn't/prohibition / don't have to=no obligation)		
Past		
was/were able to	Particular ABILITY in the past (to use someone)	He signed his book, but he was able to continue playing
could	General ABILITY in the past	She could run very fast when she was young
couldn't	General & particular ABILITY in the past	He couldn't walk past his house / I couldn't sleep yesterday
had to	From OBLIGATION	I had to leave three days before the operation
didn't have to	To say that an action was not necessary (past)	I didn't need to/didn't have to take my swimming costume (it was not necessary for me to take my suit)
didn't need to		I could/may/might have left my coat at the beach
could/may/might	POSSIBILITY in the past	
can't have + Past	IMPOSSIBILITY in the past	He can't have gone to London. I've just seen him.
must have + Past	Certainty or make logical DENIAL about the past	It's frozen. It must have been very cold recently
should	To give advice or criticism about PAST events	I should have offered
ought to		He ought to have left the team
needn't have + Past	To say that an action was not necessary, but it happened anyway	I needn't have taken my swimming costume (I took my suit, but I didn't need it)