MODALS AND THEIR USES

By Marc Botero

Modal verbs are verbs that help us understand how another verb is being used. Modal verbs are can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would. They are used to demonstrate certainty, necessity, or possibility.

✓ If I want to let someone know that there is a chance I will make it to his/her birthday, but not for certain, I could say “I may make it out to your party, but work usually leaves me tired.”
✓ If I want them to know that I will certainly be there, then the modal would change to demonstrate that, i.e. “I will make it out to your party, even if I have to hitch a ride.”
✓ If there was someone I had to see at his/her party, I could demonstrate the need to attend the party by stating “I must make it out to your party to speak with Rachel.”

➢ The modal changes to reflect a possibility, certainty, or a necessity.

Modals and the verbs that follow them do not change from their base form. In English, a verb generally changes depending on whether we are speaking in first, second, or third person. For example, “He runs home,” as opposed to “I run home.” I run home is written in first person and the verb does not take an -s behind it. He runs home is written in third person, and the verb run does take an -s behind it.

These rules change when modals are applied:

✓ When using modals, the verb does not change regardless of whether or not the point of view is first, second, or third person.
  ▪ We might topple your stack of books if you keep speaking.
  ▪ The cart would topple the display if I pushed it hard enough.

The verb that follows a modal does not change to reflect past tense. In English, a verb will change depending on whether we are speaking in past or present/future tense. For example, “I skip to the grocery store” as opposed to “I skipped to the grocery store.” Notice that in the first example, the sentence is written in first person and in the present tense. In the second example, the sentence is still in first person. However, it is written in past tense.

✓ When using modals, the verb does not change to reflect past tense.
  ▪ I can drink a cup of coffee.
  ▪ James Bond will somersault out of the airplane.
  ▪ The children could have run the school on their own.

➢ Note: To express the future tense the modal will is most commonly used. However, other modals may be used as well.
Practice with the sentences below being sure to leave the verb(s) as is or removing the -s or -es when needed.

1. Tom could build a house with his eyes closed. He makes everything look so easy.

2. Janet and Ron would walk for miles. They will beat everyone else in the Walk-a-thon.

3. Phil cheers for his favorite team. They can win the Super Bowl this year!

4. The school launched its new design for the baseball field. This is something that could have a big impact on the school.

Generally, when there are two verbs used adjacently in a sentence, the word to is added between them. “I like to eat pizza,” for example, has the verbs like and eat, separated by the word to. This is not the case when using a modal. Although a modal is considered a verb, it is not separated by the word to. For example, in the sentence “the house could catch fire any minute,” the verb catch follows the modal could, but it is not separated by the word to.

☑ Do not use to in front of a main verb that follows a modal.
  ▪ Since family is central to Filipino culture, Filipino children could have many godparents.
  ▪ Many children would like to be superheroes.

Practice with the sentences below, being sure to leave the word to when it is used correctly, and to remove it when it is used incorrectly.

1. I like to fish on Fridays.

2. I could to fish every Friday.

3. My friends love to eat ice cream, but I would to prefer candy instead.

4. When I run, I should to start bringing my phone because it can be dangerous.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Modals and their meanings</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Can</strong></td>
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<td>- General ability</td>
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</table>
| - Informal request or permission | *Can* you sing?  
You *can* begin singing whenever you like because the strings have arrived. |
| **Could**                 |
| - General ability (past)  | I *could* walk for eight miles, but now I can only walk for two. |
| - Polite, informal request or permission | *Could* you teach me how to say hello in Portuguese?  
You *could* take me out on Friday. |
| **May**                   |
| - Formal request or permission | *May* I have this dance?  
You *may* not go to the restroom till after the meeting. |
<p>| - possibility             | The man in yellow <em>may</em> want his shoes back. |
| <strong>Might</strong> (shows stronger chances than may) |
| - possibility             | I’m so hungry I <em>might</em> starve. |
| <strong>Must</strong>                  |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Necessity (present or future)</th>
<th>I must speak with the president immediately.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strong probability</td>
<td>That little boy must be hungry. He hasn’t eaten in days.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Near certainty (present or past)</td>
<td>I must have left my wallet at home.</td>
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**Should**

- Suggestions or advice
  - You should chew your food before you swallow.
- Obligations or duties
  - Every citizen should vote.
- Expectations
  - The kid’s meal should come with a toy.

**Will**

- Certainty
  - I will make it to your birthday.
- Requests
  - Will you sing the song *Summer Days*?
- Promises and offers
  - I will give you $1,000,000 if you can tell me who the president of The United States was in 1835.

**Would**

- Polite requests
  - Would you please chew with your mouth closed?
- Habitual or repeated actions (past)
  - Tyler would always cry when he watched the movie *E.T.*