Modal Verbs: Can, Must, Should…

Small helping verbs that add a meaning: ability, permission, obligation, advice, or how sure we are. Follow Sophia and Philo around the farm.

A1–C1 · Philo & Sophia, Lesson 6

How sure, how allowed, how obliged

Ability — I CAN DO IT

- **can / can't** *now*
  Sophia **can** ride a horse.
- **could / couldn't** *in general, in the past*
  Philo **could** swim when he was five.
- **be able to** *other tenses*
  She **will be able to** drive next year.
- **was able to / managed to** *one success in the past*
  They **were able to** save the barn.

Not "could" for one success: they managed to save it

Permission — IS IT ALLOWED?

- **can** *informal*
  Can I use your bike?
- **could** *more polite*
  Could I leave a little early?
- **may** *formal*
  May I come in?
- **be allowed to** *rules, any tense*
  We **aren't allowed to** feed the bull.

Answer: Yes, you can / may, not "Yes, you could"

Obligation — IT'S NECESSARY

- **must** *the speaker's own rule or feeling*
  I **must** call my grandmother.
- **have to** *a rule from outside*
  We **have to** wear helmets to ride.
- **need to** *it's needed*
  You **need to** water the seedlings.
- **had to** *the past of must and have to*
  We **had to** get up at five.

must has no past form: use had to

Mustn't or needn't? — NO OR OPTIONAL

- **mustn't** *it is forbidden*
  You **mustn't** leave the gate open.
- **can't** *not allowed*
  You **can't** park here.
- **don't have to** *it isn't necessary*
  You **don't have to** come if you're tired.
- **needn't** *it isn't necessary*
  You **needn't** bring any food.

mustn't ≠ don't have to: very different!

Advice — A GOOD IDEA

- **should / shouldn't** *advice, opinion*
  You **should** wear boots in the yard.
- **ought to** *a little more formal*
  You **ought to** call the vet.
- **had better ('d better)** *a warning: or else…*
  You**'d better** shut the gate, or the cows will get out.

had better + base form, not "had better to"

How sure? (now) — DEDUCTION

- **must** *almost sure: yes*
  The lights are on. They **must** be home.
- **may / might / could** *possible*
  Sophia **might** be in the barn.
- **can't** *almost sure: no*
  That **can't** be Philo; he's in Madrid.

The opposite of must (sure) is can't, not mustn't

Requests and offers — BEING POLITE

- **Can / Could you…?** *asking for help*
  Could you pass the salt, please?
- **Would you mind + -ing?** *very polite*
  Would you mind closing the door?
- **Shall I…?** *offering*
  Shall I carry the basket?
- **Would you like…?** *offering*
  Would you like some tea?

could and would sound more polite than can and will

Looking back — MODAL + HAVE + P.P.

- **must have** *sure it happened*
  A fox **must have** taken the hen.
- **might / could have** *perhaps it happened*
  It **might have** been the wind.
- **can't have** *sure it didn't*
  He **can't have** seen us.
- **should have** *criticism, regret*
  You **should have** locked the gate!

Say "should've", but never write "should of"

How sure are you?



can't	might	may / could	must
0%: impossible	*30%*	*50%*	*95%: almost certain*

The rules of modals

- Base form after them: *She can **swim***, not *can swims* or *can to swim*.
- No -s: *he **must***, not *he musts*.
- No *do*: ***Can** she swim?*, not *Does she can swim?*
- Except *have to, need to, ought to, be able to*.

Spanish speakers, watch out

- *Debes* = you **must**; *deberías* = you **should**.
- *Puede que llueva* = it **may / might** rain.
- *No tienes que* = you **don't have to**, not *you mustn't*.
- *Pude abrirla* (once) = I **managed to** open it.

Want more?

Sophia explains **How Sure, How Allowed, How Obliged** (Lesson 6).
See also Grammar Guides 9 and 20.

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