**The Modals**

**Here's a list of the modal verbs in English:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Can | could | may | might | will |
| would\* | must | shall | should | ought to |

**Modals are different from normal verbs:**

1: They don't use an 's' for the third person singular.  
2: They make questions by inversion ('she can go' becomes 'can she go?') [just like auxiliaries does]  
3: They are followed directly by the infinitive of another verb (without 'to').

# Modal Verbs of Probability

We can use these modal verbs (also called modals of deduction, speculation or certainty) when we want to make a guess about something. We choose the verb depending on how sure we are.

## 1: Talking about the present:

### must / might / could / may / can't + infinitive

For example: I am waiting for Julie with another friend, David.  
I ask: 'Where is Julie?'  
David guesses:

* She **must** be on the bus. (I'm fairly sure this is a good guess)
* She **might** come soon. (maybe)
* She **could** be lost. (maybe)
* She **may** be in the wrong room. (maybe)
* She **can't** be at home. (I'm fairly sure this isn't true)

[Notice that the opposite of **'must**' is '**can't** in this case.]

### Will / won't

We use **will** and **won't** when we are very sure:

* She'll be at work now.

### Should / shouldn't

**Should** and **shouldn't** are used to make an assumption about what is probably true, if everything is as we expect:

* They should be there by now.
* It shouldn't take long to drive here.

This use of **should** isn't usually used for negative events. Instead, it's a better idea to use **will**:

* The underground will be very busy now (not: 'should be').

### Can

**Can** is used for something that is generally possible, something we know sometimes happens:

* Prices can be high in London.

**Can** is not used to talk about specific possibilities:

* He could be on the bus (not: 'can be').

## 2: Using modal verbs to talk about the past:

### must / might / could / may / can't + have + past participle

* **must have** + past participle
* **might** / **might not have** + past participle
* **could** / **couldn't have** + past participle
* **may** / **may not have** + past participle
* **can't have** + past participle

For example: You: Where was Julie last night?  
David:

* She **must have forgotten** about our date.
* She **might have worked** late.
* She **could have taken** the wrong bus.
* She **may have felt** ill.
* She **can't have stayed** at home.

### Will / won't + have + past participle

**Will** and **won't / will not + have + past participle** are used for past certainty (compare with present use of 'will' above):

* The parcel will have arrived before now.

### Should + have + past participle

**Should + have + past participle** can be used to make an assumption about something that has probably happened, if everything is as we expect (compare with present use of 'should' above):

* The train should have left by now

### Could

We can use **could + infinitive** to talk about a general possibility in the past (compare with the use of 'can' above):

* Prices could be high in the sixteenth century.

This is not used to talk about specific possibilites in the past (instead we use **could + have + past participle**):

* He could have been working late (not: 'could be'. As this is a specific possiblity, 'could be' is present tense)

# Modal Verbs of Ability

When we talk about ability, we mean two things.  
  
First, we mean **general ability**. This is something that once you have learned you can do any time you want, like being able to read or swim or speak a language, for example.  
  
The other kind of ability is **specific ability**. This mean something that you can or can't do in one particular situation. For example, being able to lift something heavy, or find somewhere you are looking for.

### Present: ****can / can't (for both general and specific ability)****

* I can play the piano.
* She can speak English.
* He can't drive he's too tired.
* We can't come now.

### Past: ****could / couldn't (for general ability)****

* I could read when I was four.
* She could speak French when she was a child, but now she has forgotten it.
* He couldn't dance at all until he took lessons.
* My grandfather couldn't swim.

**was able to / couldn't (for specific ability)**

* When the computer crashed yesterday, I was able to fix it.(not 'I could fix it')
* She was able to pass the exam, even though she hadn't studied much.(not 'she could pass')
* He called us because he couldn't find the house.
* I couldn't open the window.

**could + have + past participle (an ability someone had in the past, but didn't use)**

* I could have played the piano well but I didn't practise enough.
* We could have come earlier.
* She could have studied law, but she preferred to become a secretary.

### Future: ****will / won't be able to (general ability)****

* At the end of the course, you will be able to make your own website.
* He won't be able to speak Japanese in a week! It will take months.

**can / can't (specific ability)**

* I can help you tomorrow
* I can't come to the party

# Modal Verbs of Obligation or Advice

We can use **have to + infinitive**, **must + infinitive** and **should + infinitive** to express obligation (something you have to do).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Present** | **Positive** | **Negative** |
| have to /  don't have to | strong obligation (possibly from outside)   * Children have to go to school.   (sometimes 'have got to') | no obligation   * I don't have to work on Sundays. * You don't have to eat anything you don't like. |
| must / mustn't | strong obligation (possibly based on the speaker's opinion)   * I must study today. | negative obligation   * You mustn't smoke here. |
| should / shouldn't | mild obligation or advice   * You should save some money. | mild negative obligation or advice   * You shouldn't smoke so much. |

Be careful about the difference between **mustn't** and **don't have to**!  
**Mustn't** means it's not allowed, or it's a bad idea:

* You mustn't eat so much chocolate, you'll be sick

**Don't have to** means you don't need to do something, but it's fine if you want to do it:

* I don't have to get up early at the weekend(of course, if I want to get up early, that's fine, but I can stay in bed if I want).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Past** | **Positive** | **Negative** |
| had to / didn't have to | obligation in the past   * I had to wear a school uniform when I was a child. | no obligation in the past   * We didn't have to go to school on Saturdays. |
| must\* | changes to 'had to' | - |
| should have + pp / shouldn't have + pp | a past action which didn't happen: the advice / regret is too late   * You should have gone to bed earlier, now you have missed the train. | a past action which didn't happen: the advice / regret is too late   * You shouldn't have taken that job., it was a bad idea. |

\* Remember **'must have done**' is a modal verb of deduction or speculation, not obligation in the past. For example: Julie must have left. Her coat's not here.

# Permission

We can use verbs such as 'can', 'could' and 'may' to ask for and give permission. We also use modal verbs to say something is not allowed.  
  
For example:

* **Could I leave** early today, please?
* You **may not use** the car tonight.
* **Can we swim** in the lake?

# Habits

We can use 'will' and 'would' to talk about habits or things we usually do, or did in the past.   
  
For example:

* When I lived in Italy, we **would** often **eat** in the restaurant next to my flat.
* John **will** always **be** late!

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# Past modals

The past modals 'could have + past participle', 'should have + past participle' and 'would have + past participle' can be confusing.

# Could have, should have, would have

These past modal verbs are all used hypothetically, to talk about things that didn't really happen in the past.

**Could have + past participle**  
1: **Could have + past participle** means that something was possible in the past, or you had the ability to do something in the past, but that you didn't do it. (See also [**modals of ability**](http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/modal-verbs-of-ability.html).)

* I could have stayed up late, but I decided to go to bed early.
* They could have won the race, but they didn't try hard enough.
* Julie could have bought the book, but she borrowed it from the library instead.
* He could have studied harder, but he was too lazy and that's why he failed the exam.

**Couldn't have + past participle** means that something wasn't possible in the past, even if you had wanted to do it.

* I couldn't have arrived any earlier. There was a terrible traffic jam (= it was impossible for me to have arrived any earlier).
* He couldn't have passed the exam, even if he had studied harder. It's a really, really difficult exam.

2: We use **could have + past participle** when we want to make a guess about something that happened in the past. (See also [**modals of probability**](http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/modal-verbs-of-probability.html).) In this case, we don't know if what we're saying is true or not true. We're just talking about our opinion of what maybe happened.  
  
Why is John late?

* He could have got stuck in traffic.
* He could have forgotten that we were meeting today.
* He could have overslept.

We can also choose to use **might have + past participle** to mean the same thing:

* He might have got stuck in traffic.
* He might have forgotten that we were meeting today.
* He might have got stuck in traffic.

**Should have + past participle**  
1: **Should have + past participle** can mean something that would have been a good idea, but that you didn't do it. It's like giving advice about the past when you say it to someone else, or regretting what you did or didn't do when you're talking about yourself.  
  
**Shouldn't have + past participle** means that something wasn't a good idea, but you did it anyway.

* I should have studied harder! (= I didn't study very hard and so I failed the exam. I'm sorry about this now.)
* I should have gone to bed early (= I didn't go to bed early and now I'm tired).
* I shouldn't have eaten so much cake! (= I did eat a lot of cake and now I don't feel good.)
* You should have called me when you arrived (= you didn't call me and I was worried. I wish that you had called me).
* John should have left early, then he wouldn't have missed the plane (= but he didn't leave early and so he did miss the plane).

2: We can also use **should have + past participle** to talk about something that, if everything is normal and okay, we think has already happened. But we're not certain that everything is fine, so we use 'should have' and not the present perfect or past simple. It's often used with 'by now'.

* His plane should have arrived by now (= if everything is fine, the plane has arrived).
* John should have finished work by now (= if everything is normal, John has finished work).

We can also use this to talk about something that would have happened if everything was fine, but hasn't happened.

* Lucy should have arrived by now, but she hasn't.

**Would have + past participle**  
1: Part of the [**third conditional**](http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/third-conditional.html).

* If I had had enough money, I would have bought a car (but I didn't have enough money, so I didn't buy a car).

2: Because 'would' (and will) can also be used to show if you want to do something or not (volition), we can also use **would have + past participle** to talk about something you wanted to do but didn't. This is very similar to the third conditional, but we don't need an 'if clause'.

* I would have gone to the party, but I was really busy.  
  (= I wanted to go to the party, but I didn't because I was busy. If I hadn't been so busy, I would have gone to the party.)
* I would have called you, but I didn't know your number.  
  (= I wanted to call you but I didn't know your number, so I didn't call you.)
* A: Nobody volunteered to help us with the fair  
  B: I would have helped you. I didn't know you needed help.  
  (= If I had known that you needed help, I would have helped you.)