

Modal verbs

Modal verbs (also called *modal auxiliary verbs*) express a variety of attitudes (“moods”) towards a possible action or state the lexical verb refers to.

They are used to express meaning connected with the ideas of *ability*, *obligation*, *freedom to act* and *opportunity*, and to assess the *likelihood* of events,.

Modal verbs convey two main areas of meaning. One is connected to the *degree of certainty* of something, it has to do with matters of knowledge, belief and supposition, indicating if an action or situation is *certain*, *probable*, *possible* or *impossible* (*epistemic modality*). The other is related to the ideas of *obligation* or *freedom to act*, expressing the capability, opportunity, permission or, on the contrary, prohibition to perform a given action.

Furthermore, modal verbs are used to express *volition*, to give *advice*, *make suggestions* and *recommendations*, *issue invitations*, *make requests*, *offer something* as well as *offer to do something*.

Modals, it must be remembered, convey more than one meaning, and their uses sometimes partly overlap. This is certainly one the reasons which make them difficult to master.

In addition to *must*, there are four paired modals: *can-could*; *may-might*; *will-would*; *shall-should*. The second modal of each couple has a meaning of its own but can also be, in reported speech, the past of the first modal. Aside from this case – and with the exception of *can*, and sometimes *will*, which have *could* and *would* respectively as their pasts – modal verbs do not have specific forms to indicate the past. Moreover, in pragmatic uses (in requests, offers, and so on) the second modal of the couple is often a more polite and tentative variant of the first.

While semantically they can be divided into various groups, modal verbs share the same formal characteristics. Modals are *defective* verbs, they have only *one* form each; they are not inflected; they lack non-finite forms (present or past participles, to-infinitive); cannot be preceded by auxiliaries; cannot be used in the imperative; are followed by verbs in the bare infinitive.

Questions, negative sentences and short answers are made without the auxiliary *do/does/did*. Actually modals, being *auxiliary* verbs, function as *operators* in the clause: they are used to construct negative and interrogative sentences as well as in short answers and tags:

He must be in his office

This shouldn't be difficult to do

Can you look after the children for a couple of minutes?

You will help me with my homework, won't you?

A: He could play the piano when he was five. B: Could he?

Can you play polo? Yes I can

Will and *would* have both contracted affirmative and negative forms (*'ll*, *'d* and *won't*, *wouldn't* respectively). The other modals have contracted negative forms (*can't*; *couldn't*; *mayn't*; *mightn't*; *mustn't*; *shan't*; *shouldn't*); *shan't* and *mayn't* are used only in British English; *mayn't* is hardly ever found.

Modals cannot combine; if in a sentence two modalities need to be expressed the second verb will be a semi-modal forms such as *be able to* or *have to*:

You may have to pay cash

He won't be able to reach us

Semi-modal (or *quasi-modal*) verbs, such as *be able to* or *have to*, have a semantic connection with modals but do not share their formal characteristics; they provide *supplementary*, but sometimes also *alternative*, forms to modals. For example, *be able to* must be used instead of *could* when talking about a specific action in the past, but it also acts as an alternative emphatic substitute for *can*:

I was finally able to pass the test (not: *I could pass the test)
I can/am able to speak Japanese

Modals can be followed by verbs in the progressive and perfective aspect as well as be combined with a passive form of a lexical verb:

He must still be working
She could have won
He may have been sleeping
They should be informed
You might have been killed

Obligation/necessity

In English, obligation and necessity are often expressed by modal verb *must* and quasi-modal *have to*. These are used to give *orders* and *commands* as well as to state what it is *necessary* to do in a given situation. In other words, they refer to laws, rules and regulations but are also used more ‘neutrally’, to state what needs to be done, without any reference to specific rules or laws. The difference between *must* and *have to* can be slight. Sometimes it is possible to use both verbs, sometimes it isn’t. In fact, there are meaning and usage distinctions between the two forms which need to be pointed out. For example, *must* is typically employed when speakers are exercising their own authority, while this is not the case with *have to*.

The differences between *must* and *have to* in affirmative and interrogative sentences that will be highlighted below mainly concern British English, since *have to* is used more freely (and more commonly) in American English.

Must is used to give *orders*, *commands*, to tell somebody what to do as well as to say that it is *necessary* to do something. The obligation comes directly from the speaker or writer of the sentence. Interrogative sentences are possible:

We must increase production! (order)
We must improve the quality of our goods (necessity)
Must I make all the beds?

Remember that *must* is stronger than *have to* and can sound inappropriate, or even blunt and impolite. Not surprisingly, it is uncommon in speech (i.e., in face-to-face communication). Rather than giving direct orders it is often better to remind someone of a rule, of what is necessary or advisable to do in a certain situation, and thus use *have to* or *should* instead:

You should inform me of all delays in the delivery of goods (rather than: *You must inform me ...*)

Of course, *must* is also used when imposing an obligation on oneself:

I must stop having strong drinks in the morning
I must wake up earlier

Must is quite common in written instructions and notices:

You must wear a helmet on the building site
Filters must be changed every year

Strong personal opinions are frequently stated by using *must*:

Terrorism must be stopped at any cost
The peace process must be accelerated

Must, often accompanied by degree adverbs, is used for emphatic invitations as well as to give strong recommendations and advice (*should* and *ought to* are a less emphatic alternative):

You must absolutely see their new video
You really must fix this door
You must spend some time with us on our yacht, you absolutely must!

Must is normally used when something needs to be done urgently:

We must phone for an ambulance
We must call the police

Whenever *must* cannot be used, *have to* is found in its stead. In addition to substituting for *must* in sentences expressing past obligation, as we shall see below, *have to* replaces *must* in present and past perfect sentences, after to-infinitives and modals:

We have had to wait for hours
I might have to cancel the flight
I don't want to have to repeat things twice
You will have to find yourself another place to stay

Have to (*has to* in the third person singular) is used when the situation makes something necessary, it refers to a rule, a law, a duty imposed from *outside*. The obligation, that is to say, does not originate from the speaker's authority (contrary to what happens with *must*). Questions are formed by using auxiliary *do*:

He has to edit all the articles
Do you have to reserve seats in advance?

As is the case with *must*, *have to* can be used to strongly recommend something:

You have to read this book, it's just great!
You have to find yourself a quiet place to live

The past form of *have to* is *had to*. Questions are formed by using auxiliary *did*:

We had to pump up the front tyres
Did she have to punch him in the face?

Remember that *had to* can also refer to an obligation which in the present would be expressed by *must*. In fact, as we have already noticed, *must* is not used to talk about past obligation. The only exception concerns reporting commands, and even in this case *must* can be replaced by *had to*:

I had to work twelve hours a day (not: **I must work ...*)

We had to write a short essay in addition to the term paper (it is not clear whether the students were given the assignments directly by their professor or whether reference is made, more generally, to the course requirements)

The boss said we must/had to work twelve hours a day (reported speech)

Should and *ought to* are used to make *suggestions, recommendations* as well as to give or ask for *advice*; as we shall see, *shouldn't* and *oughtn't to* are used to criticize people or tell them what does not seem advisable to do. *Should* is more common than *ought to* in affirmative sentences and especially in negatives, questions and short answers:

I should/ought to exercise much more often (= exercising would be the right thing to do; it would be better to exercise more often)

Should we move the furniture?

They should stop complaining

Remember that *should* is not found in if-clauses (where no recommendation is made or advice given). In fact, in conditional sentences, *would have to* must be used:

If I wanted to get better grades I would have to study much more (not: **I should study ...*)

After *should* or *ought to* it is possible to use the progressive aspect:

You should be studying, shouldn't you?

I ought to be exercising, I know

Should have/ought to have + past participle refer to *unfulfilled obligation* in the past. They are used to say that someone did not do what was advisable or expected as well as to ask for what was the advisable or correct thing to do in a given circumstance. *Should* is much more common than *ought to*:

You should/ought to have asked me first (but you didn't)

You shouldn't have told them (but you did)

Should I have consulted you before making a decision? Yes, you should have (= Was it advisable or correct to consult you before making a decision? Yes, it was)

The perfect and continuous aspect can be combined to talk about what would have been the best/right thing for someone to have been doing:

You should/ought to have been redecorating, not watching TV!

The expression *had better + infinitive* has a similar, though a bit stronger, meaning to *should*. It can be paraphrased as "it would be good/advisable to ...". *Had better* is more common in speech than in writing. It often conveys a sense of urgency and sometimes is used to give warnings or make threats:

We had better go. It's very late

I had better stop telling dirty jokes

You had better mind your language, pal!

In spoken English, *had* is sometimes omitted:

*They better mind their business
You better not cry*

Prohibition/criticism

Mustn't and *cannot/can't* are used to say that something is *forbidden*, that someone is *not allowed* to do something. Lack of obligation/necessity, as we shall see, is expressed otherwise (the difference is between the obligation not to do something and there being no obligation to do something).

Mustn't is very strong, it is used to tell directly someone else not to do something, it expresses an absolute prohibition or a very strong opinion/recommendation; *can't* refers to a prohibition imposed by an authority (rules, laws, regulations) and it is also found when a person refuses somebody permission to do something. Compare:

You mustn't use this tone of voice with me! (= I order you not to use this tone of voice with me)
You can't eat or drink in the library (= eating or drinking in the library is not allowed)
Sorry, you can't use my dictionary. I need it (refused permission)

Some more examples:

*You mustn't play music after midnight
Children, you mustn't cross when the lights are red!
You can't park in here*

Mustn't is also used when we want to say that it is necessary to avoid something, that it is a bad idea to do something (in this case *mustn't* has a similar meaning to *shouldn't*):

*I mustn't drink tonight, it's a long drive home
You mustn't wear casual clothes. You'll get yourself noticed*

May not is sometimes found in written (formal) English having the same sense as *must not*:

Candidates may not use bilingual dictionaries during the examination

Other ways of expressing prohibition/refusing permission are shown in the following examples:

*It is not allowed/permitted to pitch a tent in this area
It is prohibited to smoke within the building*

Past prohibitions are expressed by *couldn't*:

When I was a teenager I couldn't stay out late. I had to be back home by eleven (= I wasn't allowed to stay out late ...)
We couldn't wear miniskirts at my school (= we weren't permitted to wear miniskirts)

Shouldn't and *oughtn't to* are used to tell somebody what does not seem advisable to do:

You shouldn't/oughtn't to raise your voice when speaking with him, you know (= it is not the right thing to do, it is not advisable)

As is the case with the affirmative forms, *shouldn't* and *oughtn't to* can be used in both the continuous and perfective aspects, or a combination of the two. The continuous aspect is used to criticize somebody for doing something:

You shouldn't be smoking
You oughtn't to be copying off your classmates

Should not/ought not to have + past participle indicate that an action was taken despite the fact that it would not have been advisable or correct to take it:

You shouldn't have reacted so negatively (you reacted negatively, and that was unwise)
They oughtn't to have processed the application (it was not the correct procedure)

The combination of the perfect and continuous aspect is used to talk about what would have been advisable for someone not to have been doing:

He shouldn't have been playing with her feelings
You shouldn't have been drinking

Absence of necessity/obligation

Don't have to and *don't need to* indicate *absence of necessity/obligation*; *don't need to* (as well as *needn't*) tend to express the personal opinion of the speaker more than *don't have to*. They are not to be confused with *mustn't* or *can't* which, as we have seen above, express prohibition:

He doesn't need to wear a tie at work (= it is not necessary for him to wear a tie ...)
We don't have to wash the dishes, there's a washing machine! (= it is not necessary to wash the dishes)

Modal verb *needn't* is used, especially in British English, to say that something is unnecessary. It is much less common than *need to* or *have to* used as ordinary verbs:

You needn't worry. I'll be fine
We needn't bring snowshoes. We can rent them there

Don't have/need to and *needn't* can refer to both present or future events (we say now what it will not be necessary to do in the future):

You don't need to pick up the children tomorrow. I'll go

Future absence of obligation/necessity is expressed by *will not have/need to* (the focus is on the future event):

We won't have to show them our passports
You won't need to put down a deposit

To talk about absence of necessity/obligation in the past, *didn't have to* or *didn't need to* are used:

We didn't need/didn't have to wear a uniform in my school

There is a difference in meaning between *didn't have/didn't need to* and *needn't have + past participle*.

Didn't have/didn't need to refers to an action that was not necessary, without specifying whether we carried it out or not:

One didn't need to send a curriculum vitae (and I didn't send it)
One didn't need to send a curriculum vitae, but I sent it all the same just in case

Needn't have + past participle only refers to something that we did but was unnecessary. As we have noticed above, in the following sentences *didn't need/didn't have to* could also be used:

We needn't have called the plumber. I could have fixed the radiator (or: We didn't need/didn't have to call ...)
Why did you give them money? You needn't have left a deposit (or: You didn't need/didn't have to leave a deposit)