Modal verbs

**Ability/opportunity/possibility**

To talk about the ability, opportunity or possibility to do something can, could and quasi-modal be able to are normally used; in this case, possibility refers to having the possibility of doing something (when external circumstances permit something), not to something being possibly true.

The modal verb can is used to say that somebody has (or does not have) the ability, opportunity or possibility to do something. The negative form of can is cannot (written as one word), or can’t:

- She can ski quite well (ability)
- Can you pilot a boat? (ability)
- I can’t speak Arabic (lack of ability)
- You can check out up to five books (opportunity/possibility)
- We can use the library computers to check our e-mails (opportunity/possibility)

To talk about something that it is possible to do at any time can or may (may being more formal) are used:

- You can/may buy drugs at supermarkets in America

Be able to is less common and more formal (and therefore often more emphatic) than can:

- We are able/We are not able to access the catalogue from home
- I told you. I’m not able to run this program!

Be unable to is a more formal variant of not be able to:

- We’ve been unable to contact them so far

Be able to substitutes for can after to-infinitives, modals, and in present and past perfect forms (as we have already seen, modals cannot be used in these cases). In other words, be able to substitutes for can whenever can is grammatically impossible:

- It’s great to be able to access the library collections from home
- He’s been able to finish on time
- We may be able to deliver the goods tomorrow

Can is also used to talk about what we think now it will (or it won’t) be possible to do in the future:

- Of course I can/will be able to come to the presentation of your book
- I can’t/ won’t be able to come to the party on Saturday

Future ability, as well as future opportunity and future possibility, is only conveyed by be able to. In this case the focus of the sentence is on future time, on what will happen in the future:

- In a couple of years you’ll be able to speak English fluently (not: *In a couple of years you can speak …)
- Computers are down now, but students will be able to use them again in a few hours (not: *… students can use them again in a few hours)
When talking about future arrangements could is a more tentative alternative to can:

*We can/could meet next week*

*The Dean can/could see you tomorrow morning*

Remember that could also means “would be able to”:

*Their company could sell our products abroad*  (= Their company would be able to sell …)

*I couldn’t help you, algebra is not my forte*  (= I wouldn’t be able to help you because algebra is not my forte)

To express general ability, possibility or opportunity (or lack of ability, opportunity and possibility) in the past could (not) and was/were (not) able to are used. Was/were able to is less common, more formal and often more emphatic than could:

*People could/were able to retire earlier in the past*  (possibility/opportunity)

*I could/was able to ride a bicycle when I was six*  (ability)

*I couldn’t/wasn’t able to ride a bicycle until I was twelve*  (lack of ability)

However, when we talk about a specific action, something that was actually carried out in the past, only be able to can be used. Therefore, the difference between past action and past ability or opportunity/possibility must be kept in mind. To talk about past actions, expressions such as manage to or succeed in can substitute for be able to, especially when we want to emphasize the difficulty or effort made to achieve a certain result:

*Thank God, we were able to access the database from my computer*  (not: *we could access …*)

*I was able to hand in the essay before the deadline*  (not: *I could hand in the essay …*)

*I managed to hand in / I succeeded in handing in the essay …*

*The firefighters were able to rescue most of the people*  (not: *The firefighters could rescue …*)

*The firefighters managed to rescue / succeeded in rescuing …*

Notice that, while be able to is used when an action is actually performed, could refers to “potential” actions that may or may not be carried out (that is to say, to the ability or opportunity/possibility to do something):

*Our pilot could win the race but at the end something went wrong with the electronics*  (unfulfilled potential)

*I realized I could win the match during the first set (and I did win it)*  (fulfilled potential)

But remember that with restrictive expressions meaning “only”, “little” or “nothing but” as well as with semi-negative adverbs such as hardly, scarcely, barely, almost and just it is possible to use could:

*He could only hide and wait for the burglars to leave*

*I could hardly speak*

*They could almost get away with it*
In negative sentences and questions the difference between past action and past ability/possibility/opportunity is neutralized, thus *could* as well as *was/were able to* can be used.

> Sorry, I couldn’t / wasn’t able to fix the toaster  
> I couldn’t / wasn’t able to give him his money back  
> Could you /were you able to attend last week’s lessons?

With verbs of perception *can* and *could* are normally used:

> I can see them climbing the peak  
> The rescuers could hear people wailing under the debris

*Could have + past participle* is used to talk about a missed opportunity or something that we had the capacity for doing but did not do:

> We could have taken a boat trip, but suddenly the weather got rough  
> I could have eaten two more of those cheeseburgers

*Could have + past participle* is also used to criticize someone for not having done something:

> You could have set the table in the meanwhile  
> They could at least have brought something to drink

*Couldn’t have + past participle* means that somebody wouldn’t have been able to do something, that they would have failed even if they had tried, or that it was impossible for something to be different:

> I couldn’t have lifted that thing  
> The situation couldn’t have been worse

**Logical deduction**

Many different modals and expressions are used to make inferences about the truth of a statement. Speakers use logical deduction modals when they draw a conclusion from things or situations they know or observe:

*He has a Ferrari and a Porsche. He must like fast cars* (from the fact that he has a Ferrari and a Porsche it is easy to infer that he likes fast cars)  
*He didn’t come to work today. He might be ill* (illness is often the reason for not going to work, though we cannot be sure)
Logical deduction modals can be arranged according to the degree of certainty or uncertainty speakers feel when making an inference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Must/Have (got) to</th>
<th>Certainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should/Ought to</td>
<td>Probability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t</td>
<td>Impossibility / Negative certainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To put it simply, we could say that must, have (got) to and will convey the idea of certainty, should and ought to of probability, could, may and might of possibility (may expressing weaker possibility than could, and might than may) and can’t of impossibility:

*He must have recovered from his injuries* (= I’m certain he has recovered)
*He should have recovered from his injuries by now* (= probably he has recovered by now)
*He could/may/might have recovered from his injuries* (= perhaps he has recovered)
*He can’t already have recovered from his injuries* (= it is impossible that he has already recovered; I’m certain that he hasn’t recovered)

*Can* is also used as a deduction modal to say that something is generally possible or that it is common (could, may, and might are used to talk about specific possibilities, as we shall see later on). In this case, *can* is often a synonym for “sometimes” or “typically”, referring to situations that at times or commonly happen:

*He can be very fastidious* (= sometimes he is very fastidious)
*It can be foggy here in winter* (= fog is common here in winter)
*Trains can be packed at weekends* (= sometimes trains are packed at weekends)
*Working as a teacher can be frustrating* (= sometimes working as a teacher is frustrating)

*Must* is used to express certainty, to say that something is certainly true. *Can’t* is the negative equivalent of *must* (*mustn’t* is used for prohibitions). Like *must*, *can’t* also expresses certainty but, so to speak, on the negative side, meaning that something is impossible, that it is certainly not true:

*He must be crazy*
*You can’t be serious*
*They must have something to hide*
*You can’t have done something like that, I’m sure*

*Have (got) to* – *has (got) to* in the third person singular – can also be used instead of *must* to express certainty. This is often used in American English, especially in speech:

*He has to be the luckiest man on earth*
*You’ve got to be kidding*
*There has to be a misunderstanding*
Will is not very common in its logical deduction sense. It is used to make assumptions, its meaning being similar to that expressed by must (certainty or almost certainty):

\[ A: \text{‘There’s a small parcel in the mailbox’}. \quad B: \text{‘It will be the book I ordered a few days ago’} (= I expect to receive a book because I ordered one a few days ago) \]

If we use should or ought to (should being much more common than ought to) we are making, on the basis of what we know, a less confident inference than when we use must or will. In other words, should and ought to are used to say that something is probable:

\[ \text{The volume should/ought to be published next year} (= \text{it is probable that the volume will be published next year)} \]

Could, may and might are used to say that something is possibly true. They refer to a specific possibility, not to something which is generally possible, as is the case with can. Sentences containing these modals can be reworded using the adverbs perhaps or possibly:

\[ \text{Don’t be so sure. It might be a lie} (= \text{perhaps it is a lie)} \]
\[ \text{They could be playing poker} (= \text{perhaps they are playing poker)} \]

Could, may and might are also used for uncertain predictions or intentions:

\[ \text{There could be a blackout} (= \text{possibly there will be a blackout)} \]
\[ \text{The war may end in disaster} (= \text{possibly the war will end in disaster)} \]
\[ \text{I might decide otherwise} (= \text{perhaps I will decide otherwise)} \]

Remember that could expresses a stronger possibility than may, which in turn expresses a stronger possibility than might. As the following example shows, sometimes it can be important to indicate whether an event is more or less likely to occur. When talking about the release of people who are held hostage, authorities will no doubt weigh their words using could, rather than may or might, advisedly:

\[ \text{They hostages could get released tomorrow} (\text{optimism is justified)} \]
\[ \text{They hostages might get released tomorrow} (\text{hope, rather than optimism, is justified)} \]

May/might as well are used when we want to say there is no better alternative to something, when there is nothing more useful or more interesting to do. Such expressions have no negative or interrogative forms:

\[ \text{Traffic wardens are never lenient. We may as well pay the fine} \]
\[ \text{A: ‘Shall we stay home and order a pizza?’ B: ‘We might as well’} \]
\[ \text{I might as well take a nap} \]

May not and might not are used differently from couldn’t. May not and might not mean “it is possible that something will not happen”, whereas couldn’t means “it is impossible that something will happen”:

\[ \text{I may not be here next year. I am thinking of moving} (= \text{it is possible that I won’t be here)} \]
\[ \text{He couldn’t betray us, I’m sure} (= \text{it is impossible that he betrays us)} \]
Also notice the difference between can’t and couldn’t. The former is used to say that something is logically not possible, the latter that something would not be possible. Compare:

*He can’t be rich. He’s three months in arrears with the rent (= I’m sure he is not rich because he has not paid his rent for three months)*

*He couldn’t be an actor. He’s so shy (= I’m sure he won’t become an actor because he is so shy)*

Must, will, should, could, may, might + have + past participle are used to talk about something that certainly, probably or possibly happened in the past:

*They must/will have sent the goods by now (they have certainly sent the goods)*

*They should have set up a roadblock by now (probably they have set up a roadblock)*

*She could have had an accident (perhaps she had an accident)*

*I may have lost the keys (perhaps I lost the keys)*

Compare must have + past participle and had to; the former refers to certainty about the past, the latter to past obligation/necessity:

*He must have changed his phone number*

*I had to spend the whole night nursing patients*

Could, might and (much less often) may have + past participle can also refer to a possible action that did not happen. Thus, the example given above, She could have had an accident, can also mean “she found herself in a potentially dangerous situation but luckily nothing bad happened”. Two more examples:

*You shouldn’t have let the children play with a screwdriver. They might have hurt themselves*

*I could have signed the contract there and then if I wanted*

To talk about something that perhaps did not happen we use may/might not + have + past participle:

*The plan might not have been sabotaged*

*She may not have been hurt*

May not have and might not have + past participle are used differently from could not have + past participle, just as is the case with may/might not and could not. While may/might not + have + past participle indicates that perhaps something did not happen, could not + past participle means that it is impossible that something happened (this construction often expresses surprise or disbelief):

*She might not have taken the subway (= perhaps she didn’t take the subway)*

*She couldn’t have paid by credit card. She doesn’t have one (= it is impossible that she paid by credit card)*

To talk about something we feel certain did not happen in the past, can’t or will not + have + past participle are used:

*You can’t have thrown that picture away (not: *You mustn’t have thrown that picture away)*

*They won’t have scolded her (not: *They mustn’t have scolded her)*
Remember that, while can’t have + past participle is used when we want to say that it is not logically possible for something to have happened in the past, couldn’t + have + past participle suggests that it would not have been possible for something to happen in the past:

They can’t have missed the train. They had plenty of time  
He couldn’t have behaved so irresponsibly

The progressive aspect can be found after modals expressing logical inference:

He must still be sleeping  
She could be studying  
They may be considering our offer  
He can’t be campaigning for the Republicans!

The perfective and the progressive aspects can be combined:

He must have been joking  
That’s strange. He should have been working in his office at that time  
They might have been arguing  
She may have been rehearsing her speech last night  
She can’t have been smoking. She doesn’t smoke

Modals expressing logical deduction can also be used in the passive form, both simple and perfective:

The process can be accelerated, if necessary  
They may be held hostage  
He must have been insulted  
She could have been kidnapped  
They will have been delayed by traffic