

## MODAL VERBS

### Obligation and necessity

- We use *must*, *mustn't*, *have got to* and *have to* (*had to* in the past) to express a strong obligation. We use *don't have to* to express a lack of obligation. Generally, when the obligation comes from an external source (e.g. a written rule or regulation), we use *have to* or *have got to* rather than *must*, but this is not a strict rule.

*I've **got to go** to the bank at lunchtime.*

*You **mustn't wear** shoes in the house.*

*I wore a uniform when I was at school, but my children **don't have to** wear one.*

- We use *need to* and *needed to* to express necessity.  
*I **need to finish** this report by Friday.*
- When we use *needn't have* we suggest that something which was done was not necessary; when we use *didn't need to* it means an action wasn't necessary, whether it was actually done or not.  
*I'm glad you **didn't bring** any food, actually, because you **didn't need to**.* (= you didn't bring any food)  
*You **needn't have brought** any food. We have lots already.* (= you brought some food)

We sometimes use *shouldn't have* in this way when someone has done a kind thing.

*Thanks for the flowers, but you **shouldn't have brought** any.* (= you brought some flowers, but it wasn't necessary)

- When we want to talk about past or future obligation we use the phrasal modal verb *have to* (not *must*).  
*We all **had to leave** work early today because the heating system broke down.*  
*I **can't give** you an answer right now. **I'll have to** speak to my wife about it first.*

### Ability, possibility and probability

- We use the modals *could*, *can't*, *may*, *might*, *must* and *should* to talk about or speculate on what is (or was) possible, probable or almost certain.  
*I **might join** you later if I manage to finish my work in time.* (= it's possible that I will join you)  
*With Vince in their team, they **should win** easily.* (= they will probably win)
- We use a past modal form (modal + *have* + past participle) to speculate on a past action or event.  
*He **can't have seen** me or he **would have stopped** and said 'hello'.* (= he almost certainly didn't see me)  
*I **didn't feel** tired at all. I **could have walked** another ten miles.* (= I had the ability to walk another ten miles)  
*Why hasn't he replied? He **should have read** my message by now.* (= he has probably received it)

We can make something seem more probable by adding the word *well* after *could*, *may* or *might*.

*I **may well** accept their offer. Luc says I'd be a fool not to.*

We cannot use *should* if we are expressing a pessimistic idea.

*He **may well fail** his exam, because he's done no work.*  
(not *He ~~should well~~ fail his exam ...*)

Sometimes *might* / *could have* + past participle are used to express criticism, not possibility.

*You **might have told** me sooner that you weren't going to eat. I've cooked all this food now.* (= you didn't tell me)

When we want to talk about future ability we cannot use *can*; instead we use the phrasal modal verb *be able to*.

*Our baby is doing fine. He's still crawling, but **he'll be able to walk** in another couple of months.*

We use *can* with certain verbs (*appreciate*, *sympathize*, *understand*) for emphasis.

*I **can understand** your frustration.*

### Advice

- We use *should* and *ought to* to say what is the right and wrong thing to do or to have done, or to express a moral obligation.  
*You **ought to be** more careful about leaving your computer on when you're not at your desk. Anyone **could** read your emails.*  
*He **should** show his parents more respect.*
- The past form is *should have* or *ought to have* + past participle.  
*You **should have told** me that you didn't eat meat. I would have cooked something else.*

### Unwillingness

We use *won't* (and *wouldn't* in the past) to express the idea that someone or something is unwilling to do something.

*This new key **won't turn** in the lock.*

*I'm sick of my car. It **wouldn't start** again this morning.*

### Permission and offers

- We use *can*, *could*, *may* and *might* to ask for permission and to make requests. *Could* and *might* are more indirect and so often considered more polite forms.  
***May I ask** you a personal question?*  
***Could you just give** me a hand moving this table?*  
***Might you be willing** to be filmed for a short video we are making?*
- We cannot use *may* with *you* in this way.  
***Could you just spare** me ten minutes of your time later this morning? (not **May you just spare**)*

### would

*would* is used to add a conditional sense to statements and requests. It is often used to respond to suggestions or offers, when we don't want to commit to a definite answer.

*'Shall we meet for a drink some time?' 'Yes that **would be nice**.'*

*'**Would you be prepared** to split the cost with me?' 'That **would be difficult** for me, I'm afraid.'*

### ► Exercises 1–4