

Modals

Many types of modal meaning have been identified by linguists, including possibility, certainty, ability, habit, inference, obligation, desirability, intention, necessity, politeness, consent, willingness, permission, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) describe these 'core meanings' of modals and, in addition, they show that all the modal verbs except *can* some-times express how 'certain' a speaker is about the truth of an utterance. This is called the epistemic use of modal verbs,

e.g.

You *must* be home before dark. (core use = obligation)

You *must* be joking. (epistemic use = I am almost certain you are joking.)

Core meanings

Each modal has a core meaning or meanings.

<i>must</i>	You must be careful when you cross the road. (obligation)
<i>can</i>	He <i>can</i> read. (ability) You <i>can</i> go. (permission)
	Tomatoes <i>can</i> give you indigestion. (possibility)
<i>may</i>	You <i>may</i> leave now. (permission) They <i>may</i> call. (possibility)
<i>will</i>	<i>I'll</i> ring you tonight. (intention) <i>I'll</i> do it. (willingness)
<i>should</i>	You <i>should</i> ask for help. (obligation)
<i>shall</i>	Shall I make you some coffee? (willingness) I shall never forget this. (intention)
<i>might</i>	He said you <i>might</i> know about it. (possibility)
<i>could</i>	We <i>could</i> leave it here. (possibility/permission)
<i>would</i>	<i>Would</i> you help them? (willingness)
<i>ought to</i>	I <i>ought</i> to clean the stove, but I can't be bothered. (obligation)
<i>have to</i>	I <i>have</i> to be home by 6 p.m. (obligation)
<i>have got to</i>	I've <i>got</i> to go now. (obligation)
be to	He <i>is</i> to report to the police every day while on bail. (obligation)

Epistemic meanings

Epistemic modality is the expression of degrees of certainty. The main modals are listed as follows, approximately from most certain to least certain,

must	<p>You must be our new neighbour.</p> <p>You were born in 1960. It's 2003 now, so you must be 43 this year.</p>
<i>will</i>	<p>Ask Sam, he <i>will</i> know the answer.</p> <p>(The speaker is certain now, not at some time in the future.)</p>
<i>would</i>	<p>It <i>would</i> cost thousands of dollars to repair it.</p>
<i>should</i>	<p>I'll post the letter on Monday and it <i>should</i> arrive on Wednesday.</p>
<i>ought to</i>	<p>He <i>ought to</i> be home by now.</p>
<i>might</i>	<p>Don't do that, you <i>might</i> hurt yourself.</p>
<i>may</i>	<p>You may like this.</p>
<i>could</i>	<p>Don't wait for us, we <i>could</i> be late.</p> <p>That flooded river <i>could</i> be dangerous.</p>

Learning how to use modal verbs

Because modal meanings and structures are complex, learners will only gradually build up to using the whole system productively. For production, learners do not need all the forms and meanings until a very advanced level. As we have seen, some meanings are expressed by two or three modals. Learners can get by with only one of them, e.g.

 might
It could rain.
 may

Could seems to be the most frequent of these in spoken English, and therefore it is perhaps sensible to teach it before might or may. Similarly, should can cover ought to. Would, could, should, might are all used to express hypothetical statements or conditions, e.g. It would/might/could/ should be better to go this way. Would is the most frequent and can be chosen for learners to use. Choosing only one form out of several that can express the same meaning reduces the learning burden by removing a source of confusion. In hypothetical statements, the presence or absence of not with modals can be especially difficult, e.g. I would go if I had time means I won't be going, even though there is no negative with would.

Exercises:

<http://www.englishpage.com/modals/modalintro.html>