

## UNIT 7

### Introduction to modal auxiliary verbs

- 1 These are the modal auxiliary verbs.

can	could	may	might	shall	should
will	would	must	ought to		

They are used with great frequency and with a wide range of meanings. They express ideas such as willingness and ability, permission and refusal, obligation and prohibition, suggestion, necessity, promise, and intention. All modal auxiliary verbs can express degrees of certainty, probability, or possibility.

- 2 They have several characteristics.

- There is no -s in the third person.

*He can swim.*

*She must go.*

- There is no do/does in the question.

*May I ask a question?*

*Shall we go?*

- There is no don't/doesn't in the negative.

*You shouldn't tell lies.*

*You won't believe this.*

- They are followed by an infinitive without to. The exception is *ought to*.

*It might rain.*

*Could you help?*

*We ought to be on our way.*

- They don't really have past forms, infinitives, or -ing forms. Other verbs are used instead.

*I had to work hard when I was young.*

*I'd love to be able to ski.*

*I hate having to get up in the morning.*

- They can be used with perfect infinitives to refer to the past. For more information, see Grammar Reference Unit 10.

*You should have told me that you can't swim.*

*You might have drowned!*

*She must have been crazy to marry him.*

### Modal auxiliary verbs of probability, present and future

The main modal auxiliary verbs that express probability are described here in order of certainty. *Will* is the most certain, and *might/could* are the least certain.

#### will

- 1 *Will* and *won't* are used to predict a future action. The truth or certainty of what is asserted is more or less taken for granted.

*I'll see you later.*

*His latest book will be out next month.*

- 2 *Will* and *won't* are also used to express what we believe or guess to be true about the present. They indicate an assumption based on our knowledge of people and things, their routines, character, and qualities.

*'You've just got a text.' 'That'll be the taxi.'*

*Leave the meat in the oven. It won't be cooked yet.*

*'I wonder what Sarah's doing.' 'Well, it's Monday morning, so I guess that right now she'll be taking the children to school.'*

#### must and can't

- 1 *Must* is used to assert what we infer or conclude to be the most logical or rational interpretation of a situation. We do not have all the facts, so it is less certain than *will*.

*You say he walked across the Sahara Desert! He must be mad!*

*You must be tired. That was a long walk!*

- 2 The negative of this use is *can't*.

*She can't have a ten-year-old daughter! She's only 21 herself.*

*'Whose is this coat?' 'It can't be Mary's. It's too small.'*

#### should

- 1 *Should* expresses what may reasonably be expected to happen.

Expectation means believing that things are or will be as we want them to be. This use of *should* has the idea of *if everything has gone according to plan*.

*Our guests should be here soon (if they haven't got lost).*

*This homework shouldn't take you too long (if you've understood what you have to do).*

*We should be moving into our new house soon (as long as nothing goes wrong).*

- 2 *Should* in this use has the idea that we want the action to happen. It is not used to express negative or unpleasant ideas.

*You should pass the exam. You've worked hard.*

*'You should fail the exam. You haven't done any work at all.'*

*We would say ... I don't think you'll pass the exam.*

#### may and might

- 1 *May* expresses the possibility that an event will happen or is happening.

*We may go to Greece this year. We haven't decided yet.*

*'Where's Ann?' 'She may be having a bath, I don't know.'*

- 2 *Might* is more tentative and slightly less certain than *may*.

*It might rain. Take your umbrella.*

*'Where's Peter?' 'He might be upstairs. There's a light on.'*

- 3 Learners of English often express these concepts of future possibility with *perhaps* or *maybe* ... *will* and so avoid using *may* and *might*. However, these are widely used by native speakers, and you should try to use them.

#### could

- 1 *Could* has a similar meaning to *might*.

*You could be right. I'm not sure.*

*That film could be worth seeing. It had a good review.*

- 2 *Couldn't* is not used to express a future possibility. The negative of *could* in this use is *might not*.

*You might not be right.*

*That film might not be any good.*

- 3 *Couldn't* has a similar meaning to *can't* above, only slightly weaker.

*She couldn't have a ten-year-old daughter! She's only 21 herself.*

#### Related verbs

Here are some related verb forms that express probability.

*William's so brainy. He's bound to pass the exam.*

*We're having a picnic tomorrow, so it's bound to rain.*

*You're likely to find life very different when you live in China.*

*Are you likely to come across Judith while you're in Oxford?*

## Other uses of modal auxiliary verbs and related verbs

Here is some further information about modal auxiliary verbs, but it is by no means complete. See a grammar book for more details.

### Ability

- 1 *Can* expresses ability. The past is expressed by *could*.  
*I can speak three languages.*  
*I could swim when I was three.*
- 2 Other forms are provided by *be able to*.  
*I've never been able to understand her.* (Present Perfect)  
*I'd love to be able to drive.* (infinitive)  
*Being able to drive has transformed my life.* (-ing form)  
*You'll be able to walk again soon.* (future)
- 3 To express a fulfilled ability on one particular occasion in the past, *could* is not used. Instead, we use *was able to* or *managed to*.  
*She was able to survive by clinging onto the wrecked boat.*  
*The prisoner managed to escape by climbing onto the roof.*

### Advice

- 1 *Should* and *ought* express mild obligation or advice. *Should* is much more common.  
*You should go to bed. You look very tired.*  
*You ought to take things easier.*
- 2 We use *had better* to give strong advice, or to tell people what to do. There can be an element of threat – 'If you don't do this, something bad will happen.'  
*You'd better get a haircut before the interview. (If you don't, you won't get the job.)*  
*I'm late. I'd better get a move on. (If I don't, I'll be in trouble.)*

### Note

The form is always past (*had*), but it refers to the immediate future.  
*She'd better start revising. The exams are next week.*

### Obligation

- 1 *Must* expresses strong obligation. Other verb forms are provided by *have to*.  
*You must try harder!*  
*You mustn't hit your baby brother.*  
*What time do you have to start work?*  
*I had to work hard to pass my exams.* (Past Simple)  
*You'll have to do this exercise again.* (future)  
*We might have to make some economies.* (infinitive)  
*She's never had to do a single day's work in her life.* (Present Perfect)  
*I hate having to get up early.* (-ing form)
- 2 *Must* expresses the opinion of the speaker.  
*I must get my hair cut. (I am telling myself.)*  
*You must do this again. (Teacher to student)*  
*Must* is associated with a more formal, written style.  
*Candidates must answer three questions.* (On an exam paper)  
*Books must be returned by the end of the week.* (Instructions in a library)
- 3 *Have to* expresses a general obligation based on a law or rule, or based on the authority of another person.  
*Children have to go to school until they're 16. (It's the law.)*  
*Mum says you have to tidy your room.*
- 4 *Mustn't* expresses negative obligation. *Don't have to* expresses the absence of obligation.  
*You mustn't steal. It's very naughty.*  
*You don't have to go to England in order to learn English.*

- 5 *Have got to* is common in British English. It is more informal than *have to*.  
*I've got to go now. Cheerio!*  
*Don't have a late night. We've got to get up early tomorrow.*
- 6 Here are some related verb forms that express obligation.  
*Visitors are required to have a visa.*  
*When you're 18, you're supposed to take responsibility for yourself.*  
*You aren't supposed to park on double yellow lines.*  
*You need to think carefully before you make a decision.*  
*He doesn't need to work. He's a millionaire.*

### Permission

- 1 *May*, *can*, and *could* are used to ask for permission.  
*May I ask you a question?*  
*May I use your phone?*  
*Can/Could I go home? I don't feel well.*  
*Can/Could I borrow your car tonight?*
- 2 *May* is used to give permission, but it sounds very formal. *Can* and *can't* are more common.  
*You can use a dictionary in this exam.*  
*You can't stay up till midnight. You're only five.*  
*You can't smoke in here. It's forbidden.*
- 3 To talk about permission generally, or permission in the past, we use *can*, *could*, or *be allowed to*.  
*Children can/are allowed to do what they want these days.*  
*I couldn't go out on my own until I was 16.*  
*I wasn't allowed to*
- 4 Here are some related verb forms that express permission.  
*Passengers are not permitted to use mobile phones.*  
*My parents don't allow me to ...*  
*I'm not allowed to stay out late.*  
*My parents don't let me ...*  
Note that this sentence with *let* is not possible in the passive.  
*\*I'm not let ...*

### Willingness and refusal

- 1 *Will* expresses willingness. *Won't* expresses a refusal by either people or things. *Shall* is used in questions.  
*I'll help you.*  
*She says she won't get up until she's had breakfast in bed.*  
*The car won't start.*  
*Shall I give you a hand?*
- 2 The past is expressed by *wouldn't*.  
*My boss said she wouldn't give me a promotion. I'm going to look for another job.*

### Requests

Several modal verbs express a request.  
*Can/Could/Will/Would you do me a favour?*  
*Can/Could I open the window?*

Modal verbs are also dealt with in Units 9, 10, and 11.