

56 Modal verbs

Modal verbs are very common in English. They are used to talk about a variety of things, particularly possibilities, obligations, and deductions.

See also:

Present simple negative 2

Forming questions 34 Types of verbs 49

56.1 USES OF MODAL VERBS

English has many modal verbs. Each modal verb can be used in several different contexts.

ABILITY

I **can** speak three languages.
I **can't** read Latin because it's too difficult.
I **couldn't** study it when I was at school.



PERMISSION

You **can** have more cake if you want.
You **may** take as much as you like.
Could I have another slice of cake?



REQUESTS

Can / **Could** you give me a ride home later?
Would you email James for me, please?
Will you lock up the office tonight?



OFFERS

Can I help you with those?
May I take one of those for you?
Shall I carry some of your bags?



SUGGESTIONS AND ADVICE

You **should** / **ought to** go to the doctor.
You **could** try the new medicine.



OBLIGATION

You **must** arrive on time for work.
You **must not** be late for work.



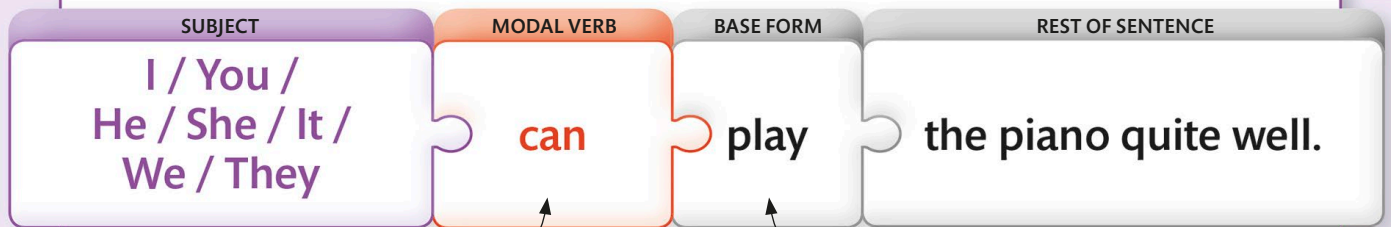
LOGICAL DEDUCTIONS

It **can't** be Jane because she's on vacation.
It **could** / **might** / **may** be Dave. I don't know.
It **must** be Tom, since nobody else ever calls.



56.2 MODAL VERB FORMATIONS

Modal verbs share certain characteristics. They don't change form to match the subject, and they are always followed by a main verb in its base form. Their question and negative forms are made without "do."



The modal verb stays the same for any subject.

The main verb stays in its base form.

Negatives are formed by adding "not" between the modal verb and main verb.

You **should** run a marathon.



You **should not** run a marathon.



Questions are usually formed by swapping the subject and the modal verb.

They **should** visit the castle.



Should they visit the castle?



"Ought to" and "have to" are exceptions because they use "to" before the base form. "Ought to" is a more formal way of saying "should," and "have to" means "must." They both act like normal verbs.

You **{ ought to / have to }** learn how to drive.

