

The Writing Center @ JSCC

Modal Verbs

Modal verbs are verbs that we use to indicate how likely or possible a circumstance is. Consider the question, “Are you coming to Opal’s party this weekend?” Depending on the modal you choose to use in your answer, you’ll communicate whether you’re obligated to go, whether you want to go, whether you’ll attend or not, and how likely each of those circumstances are: “I could”; “I would”; “I might”; “I will”; I should.” Each response is slightly different, isn’t it?

When deciding which modal to use, decide whether the circumstance is optional or required. Then, check the table below to match the meaning with your intention in the sentence.

These special verbs behave very differently from normal verbs. Here are some important differences:

1. Modal verbs do not take "-s" in the third person. Examples:
 - He **can** speak Chinese. (**NOT** *He cans speak Chinese.)
 - She **should** be here by 9:00. (**NOT** *She shoulds be here by 9:00.)
2. You use "not" to make modal verbs negative, even in Simple Present and Simple Past. Examples:
 - He **should not** be late.
 - They **might not** come to the party.
3. Many modal verbs cannot be used in the past tenses or the future tenses. Examples:
 - *He will can go with us. (Not Correct)
 - *She musted study very hard. (Not Correct)

Meaning	Modal	Example
ability	can, could	You can pick up your tickets any time after 5:00 P.M
intention	will, would, shall	Jamal will study law next year.
permission	can, could, may, might	Renters may keep small pets as long as they are not noisy.
possibility	may, might, can, could	Ian’s family can afford to travel, but they don’t.
necessity	must, have to	Nakia must work to pay for her college expenses.
obligation	should	Parents should read to their children on a regular basis.
speculation	would	If we had a longer break, I would visit my family.

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Modal Verbs Exercise 1

Instructions: Choose the correct verb for the blanks in each of the following sentences

1. If you drive a car, you ____ have a driving license.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. can

2. You ____ drink a lot and drive.
 - a. shouldn't
 - b. mustn't
 - c. don't have to

3. When you are in a car, you ____ wear a seatbelt.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. may

4. When driving a car, you ____ listen to the radio.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. can

5. You ____ to pay road tax if you own a car.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. have

6. You ____ stop at a red traffic light.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. have

7. When you ride a motorbike you ____ wear a helmet.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. have

8. You ____ smoke while you are driving.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. can

9. If you own a car, you ____ have insurance.
 - a. should
 - b. must
 - c. can

10. You ____ exceed the speed limit.
 - a. shouldn't
 - b. mustn't
 - c. don't have to