

Modal verbs – usage & examples part 2

Level: B1

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CAN, COULD, BE ABLE TO

CAN AND COULD WITH PERCEPTION VERBS

The modal verbs **can** and **could** are often used with perception verbs. Sentences such as *I can hear you, he could smell the smoke, etc.*, are much more frequent than expressions *I hear you or he smelled the smoke*.

The verbs which occur with **can/could**:

verb	example
hear	Can you hear that sound? Don't shout. I can hear you perfectly well
see	Can you see that man on a bike? I can't see anything. It's dark here.
remember	I can remember my first day at school. I couldn't remember the title of the book.
feel	I can feel it in my bones. Can you feel the heat?
smell	I can smell something strange. Could you smell gas?
understand	I can understand why you don't want to go. I couldn't understand a word she said.

BE ABLE TO

The modal verbs **can** and **could** have very limited usage. These cannot be used in perfect tenses, have no future form or infinitive, etc.

In such situations, these verbs are replaced by the structure **be able to**.

It takes place:

- after another modal verb

Example:

You **can find** her either in her office or at home.
You **should be able to find** her either in her office or at home.

- in tenses other than Simple Present (**can**) and Simple Past (**could**)

Example:

I **have never been able to learn** Japanese, although I've tried.
Will you **be able to help** me with all the housework?

- in structures requiring the usage of an infinitive or gerund form

Example:

It's very **nice to be able to meet** your friends.
She was **grateful for being able to be** with us.

- when we describe what a person **may/may not** have done in a given situation in the past

Example:

I **could speak** English pretty well, but I **wasn't able to utter** a word during my exam.

MUST, HAVE TO

INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL OBLIGATION?

Both the modal verb **must** and the ordinary **have to** express the obligation, but their usage is different.

A necessity resulting from the belief of the speaker is expressed with the verb **must**.

Example:

You **must come** to my party.

I **must buy** a new record.

I **must buy** a new record.

A necessity resulting from someone else's order, command or regulation is expressed by the verb **have to**.

Example:

I **have to be** at work before 8 o'clock.
You **have to wear** a seat belt in a car.

A necessity resulting from the so-called "higher power" is also expressed with the verb **have to**.

Example:

She **has to go** to the hospital.
We **have to find** another hotel.

In everyday speech, we are more likely to use the short form **have got**.

Example:

It's getting late. I'**ve got to** go.
We'**ve got to** come to work on Sunday.

EXPRESSING NECESSITY IN DIFFERENT TENSES

The verb **must**, like majority of the other modal verbs, has only one form. It can only be used to describe the present and the near future.

In the other tenses, instead of **must**, we should use **have to**, which is subject to the same rules as English verbs.

present	We must go .
past	We had to go .
future	We'll have to go .

In such a situation, it does not matter whether the verb describes an internal obligation or a necessity resulting from external circumstances.

QUESTIONS AND NEGATIVE FORMS

The verb "**have to**" forms questions and negative forms in a typical pattern – with the auxiliary verbs or the inversion.

Example:

What time **does** he **have to** leave?
Do you **have to** give the book back today?
Did you **have to** call the police?

MUSTN'T, NEEDN'T, DON'T NEED

If we would like to express the lack of obligation or necessity, we choose one of the two following constructions:

- not have to

Example:

I **don't have to be** at home before midnight.

- not need to

Example:

I **needn't be / don't need to be** at home before midnight.

We form the negative sentence in two ways: **needn't to** or **don't need to**.

Both constructions can be used interchangeably.

The negative form of **must** is **mustn't**, but its meaning is completely different! **Mustn't** express a prohibition.

Example:

You **mustn't** park here!

MAY, MIGHT

The modal verbs **may** and **might** have a similar meaning. The verb **may** is used to express requests and asking for permission, but it is more official and polite than the verbs **can** and **could** used in similar circumstances.

Example:

Can I sit here?
Could I sit here?
May I sit here?

The verb "**may**" can also express permission.

Example:

You **can** take my car.
You **may** take my car.

The verbs **may** and **might** are used to define possibilities, to describe what is possible.

Example:

Lucy **may**/ **might** know his mobile number.

The alternative to **may** and **might** is **could**.

Example:

Lucy **could** know his mobile number.

We create a negative form by adding **not** to the verbs **may** and **might**, using full forms: **might/might not**, **may/may not**.

SHOULD, OUGHT TO

Besides, the verb **should** describe above, advice, suggestions, and recommendations can also be expressed with the verb **ought to**. The meaning of both phrases is similar. The only difference is that after **ought** the main verb appears in an infinitive with **to**, hence the expression is written as **ought to**.

Example:

We **should buy** more food = We **ought to buy** more food.

Ought to form questions and negative sentences in the same way as other modal verbs.

Example:

Ought I to write him?
You **oughtn't to** worry.

Despite the same usage, **ought to** occur less frequently than **should**, perhaps due to the pronunciation and the formation of clusters of consonants, e.g. negative form **oughtn't to**.