

What are modal verbs?

In English, modal verbs are a class of verbs that **perform particular functions** other than simply describing an action. These functions include time, possibility, ability, obligation, and many others.

They can be distinguished from other verbs by their **defectiveness** (they do not have participle or infinitive forms) and by their **neutralisation** (they do not take the ending *-(e)s* in the third-person singular).

A modal verb therefore **remains the same**, regardless of subject. Each modal verb is also **fixed in time**.

The modal verbs are:

- **can** ➤ I **can** play the piano.
- **could** ➤ She **could** speak French.
- **will** ➤ We **will** go to the cinema soon.
- **would** ➤ They **would** like some pizza.
- **shall** ➤ **Shall** we go?
- **may** ➤ **May** I go to the toilet, please?
- **might** ➤ It **might** rain tomorrow.
- **should** ➤ You **should** study more.
- **must** ➤ You **must** come again soon.

Modal verbs can also be subdivided based on the situations in which they are used. This is shown in the table.

ABILITY	ABILITY	I can speak English.	
	to talk about a specific achievement	Edmund Hillary could climb very well. In 1953, they managed to get to the top of Mount Everest. He was able to achieve that thanks to Sherpa Norgay. From the top they could see thousands of miles away.	
SPECULATING FUTURE	SURE	They must be at home, their car is outside and they never leave without it.	
	PROBABLE	They should be at home, they didn't say they were leaving. They may be at home, they're usually here at this time of the day. They could be at home. Let's go check. They might be at home, but I don't know.	
	CAN'T BE SURE	They can't be home, they said they'd be away this week.	
SPECULATING PAST	LOGICAL	I must have left my phone at home. I don't remember taking it. I can't have left my phone at home, I had it with me a moment ago. I think I may have left my phone at home. Let's go check.	
	NOT SURE	I guess I could have left my phone at home, but I'm not sure. I suppose I might have left my phone at home before leaving. Luckily I found my phone, I thought it could have been stolen.	
	DID NOT HAPPEN	Luckily I found my phone, thought I might have lost it.	
OBLIGATION / ADVICE / PROHIBITION	OBLIGATORY	Men must wear a tie to the party.	It's a rule.
	ADVISED	You have to wear a tie to the party.	It's obligatory.
		You must wear a tie to the party.	It's a strong believe.
	OPTIONAL	You ought to wear a tie to the party.	Formal request.
		You should wear a tie to the party.	Recommendation.
	NOT ADVISED	You can wear a tie to the party.	It's your choice.
You don't have to wear a tie to the party.		It's not an obligation.	
FORBIDDEN	You shouldn't wear a tie to the party.	It's not recommended.	
		You can't wear a tie to the party.	It's forbidden.
		Men must not / musn't wear a tie to the party.	
PERMISSIONS AND REQUESTS	INVITATIONS	→ Would you like to come to the party?	
	ASK FOR PERMISSION	Can I borrow your tomorrow?	Casual
		Could I (possibly) borrow your car tomorrow?	Politer
		May I borrow your car tomorrow?	
Would you mind if I used your car tomorrow?			
OFFERS	→ Would you like anything to eat?		
REQUESTS	Can you help me?	Casual	
	Could you help me?	Politer	
	Would you help me?		
	Would you mind helping me?		

HOW TO USE MODAL VERBS

The great thing about modal verbs is that they all follow the same rules. These are:

- They remain the same for all subjects;
- They are never used with auxiliary verbs (e.g. do, etc.);
- They behave like the verb “to be” in questions and negative statements (e.g. inversion, use of ”not” etc.);
- The verb that follows a modal verb is always in its bare infinitive form (the infinitive without the “to”).

They will go to Rome.

They will not go to Rome.

Will they go to Rome?

As modal verbs all follow the same rules, we can simply swop one modal verb for another in a sentence to change the tense and/or meaning:

We speak Italian.

- ✓ ***We can speak Italian*** : Noi possiamo (sappiamo) parlare italiano.
- ✓ ***We could speak Italian**** : Noi potremmo/potevamo parlare italiano.
- ✓ ***We will speak Italian*** : Noi parleremo/abbiamo intenzione di...
- ✓ ***We would speak Italian*** : Noi parleremmo italiano.
- ✓ ***We shall speak Italian**** : Noi parleremo italiano.
- ✓ ***We may speak Italian**** : Noi potremmo parlare italiano.
- ✓ ***We might speak Italian**** : Noi potremmo parlare italiano.
- ✓ ***We should speak Italian*** : Noi dovremmo parlare italiano.
- ✓ ***We must speak Italian**** : Noi dobbiamo parlare italiano.

** We will take a closer look at these modal verbs separately.*

SEMI-MODAL VERBS: **DARE, NEED, OUGHT TO AND USED TO**

Dare (not), need (not), ought to and *used to* are often called semi-modal because in some ways they are formed like modal verbs and in some ways they are like other main verbs.

Like modals, they do not change form for the third person (i.e. no –s!).

- *It used to be so easy. It ought to be easy now.*
- *She needn't worry.*
- *John daren't tell Ruth the truth.*
- *I used to play football when I was young.*
- *You needn't go to the shop, I've already bought some milk.*

NEGATIVE AND QUESTION FORMS: The negative form of *need*, *dare* and *used to* is made by using the **auxiliary verb** *do* but it can also be made without using *do* (like modal verbs). *Ought to* never uses the auxiliary verb *do* (but the negative *oughtn't to* is very rare).