

The Writing Center @ KUMC

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Modals

Modal verbs are helping verbs that precede another verb and add meaning to this main verb by expressing possibility, ability, permission, or obligation. With a modal verb, the root form of the main verb is generally used, **not** the infinitive form that contains the word “to.” An exception to this is the phrase “ought to,” which is considered a modal verb. Modal verbs are also different from other verbs in that they never change their form. That is, they never end in “s,” “ed,” or “ing.”

Modals of Possibility

Modals can suggest the logical probability of something happening and indicate the strength of that likelihood. The strongest modal in this case, **must**, is so potent that it is almost forcing something to happen. At the other end of the spectrum are **can**, **could**, and **might**, which express a faint possibility of something occurring. These are the modal verbs for expressing present and future possibility, from strongest to weakest:

Strongest	Must/must not, Will/won't, Would/wouldn't
Stronger	Should/shouldn't
Weaker	May/may not
Weakest	Can/can't, Could/couldn't, Might/might not

Examples: *David keeps yawning. He **must** be tired.*

*We **will** meet at the coffeehouse tomorrow at 2.*

*I **might** get a raise soon.*

To express past probability, **have** and the **past participle** are added to the following modal verbs:

- Must/must not

- Can't
- Could/couldn't
- Might/might not

Examples: *He **must** have left work already.*

*Fido **can't have** escaped through that gap in the fence—it's too small.*

Modals of Ability

These modals indicate skill or general abilities, the ability to do something at a specific time in the present or future, or in the past. The following are modals of ability:

- Can/can't (present or future)
- Could/couldn't (past)

Examples: *Sarah **can** speak Mandarin fluently.*

*John **could** swim before he **could** walk.*

Modals of Permission

Modal verbs of permission are used to grant approval of an action or to ask for approval. **Can** and **may** are basically the same, but **may** is more formal and used less often than **can**. These are the modal verbs of permission:

- Can/can't (present or future)
- Could/couldn't (past)
- May

Examples: *You **can** borrow my DVD.*

*Yes, you **may** have another cookie.*

Modals of Obligation

These modal verbs are used to express something that is a requirement or necessity, or something that is a recommendation or moral obligation. The following are the modal verbs of obligation:

- Must/must not
- Should/shouldn't
- Ought to

Must indicates a requirement or necessity, while **should** and **ought to** is used when giving advice or commenting on the desirability of an action.

Examples: *You **must** be 18 years old to vote in the U.S.*

*You **should** get more sleep.*

As academic writing is based on research, remember that whichever modal verb you choose should match the level of certainty of your evidence. When writing about research or phenomena, the simple past and simple present is appropriate. It is when writing about theoretical topics, however, that use of modal verbs is warranted.