

Modal Verbs

General information

- Modal verbs: must can could may might should shall would will ought to

| Ability/ lack of ability/ possibility | Can/can't/could/ couldn't | She can speak 4 languages |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Possibility (present or future) | May/might | He might be in his office, I'll check |
| obligation | Must/ should/ought to | We should change some currency |
| prohibition | Mustn't/ can't/shouldn't | You can't cross the road here |
| speculation | Can't/ could/must/may/might | Sandra must be in the school, her bag's in the class |
| Predictions/ decisions at the moment of speech | Will/won't | You exams won't be easy as I see |

Ability I

(present and past)

| Can | Be able to |
|--|--|
| Ability to do something | Surprising or involves to overcome some difficulty (often). <i>Despite his handicap he is able to drive a car</i> |
| Is used with passive | Are not usually used with passive. <i>This book can be used by beginners!</i> |
| There is no future ability | Where can/could grammatically impossible. <i>We love being able to converse with the local people.</i> Future ability. <i>I will be able to speak fluently by the end of the course</i> |
| Future arrangements. <i>The doctor can't see you before six as he's busy till then</i> | Future arrangements. <i>The doctor won't be able to see you before six as he's busy till then</i> |

Ability I

(present and past)

- To emphasis difficulty or to suggest effort, we use *manage to/succeed in +ing*. *Do you think she will manage to get a visa?*
- If the future arrangement is less certain we use *could, may or might +be able to*. *The dentist might be able to see you late today; I'll have to check my diary.*

Ability II (past)

| could | Was/were be able to |
|--|--|
| Past ability. <i>She could swim before she could walk</i> | Specific occasion in the affirmative. <i>Mike's car broke down yesterday but fortunately he was able to repair it.</i> |
| Used in questions, superlatives, and in sentences with limiting adverbs such as <i>only or hardly</i> . <i>Sorry, but that is the cheapest hotel I could find.</i> | Used in questions, superlatives, and in sentences with limiting adverbs such as <i>only or hardly</i> . <i>She was so exhausted she was hardly able to speak</i> |
| Lack of ability | Lack of ability |

Ability II (past)

- Could have +P II to describe the past ability which wasn't used or past opportunity which wasn't taken. *She could have paid by credit card but she preferred to use cash.*
- Couldn't have been+ comparative adj to emphasise a past action or feeling. *I couldn't have been more pleased when I heard your result.*

Possibility

Present

- *can* – when we talk about things which are generally possible. *May* - academic or scientific English. *Healthy insurance can be very expensive. Over-prescribing of antibiotics may lead to the rapid development of resistant strains.*
- *May/might/could* – specific possibility. *This rash could be a symptom of something more serious.*
- *May well/might well/ could well* – to talk about a strong possibility. *Don't worry! The payment may well be in the post.*

Possibility Present

- *Could/might* – possibility which depends on certain condition. *She could learn much more quickly if she paid attention.*
- *POSSIBLY NOT* – *may not/might not*
- *DEFINITELY NOT* – *can't.*

Possibility (future)

- *Will/won't be able to* – talk about future possibility or impossibility. *We'll be able to get a coffee at the theatre but we won't be able to eat until after the show.*
- *May/might/could* – talk about future actions which are less certain (perhaps)
- *Could* – for possibility weaker than may/might.
- *Couldn't* – is not used to say something is definitely impossible (present\future).
- *May/might have+P II* – possible completed action by the time in the future. *Call me tomorrow. I might have finished the project by then.*

Possibility

Past

- *Could* – general possibility in the past (things which sometimes happen). *Teachers could be very strict at my old school.*
- *Might* – in Academic or scientific English.
- *Could/Might + have PII* – talk about specific past possibility. *She might have done it. She had an opportunity and a motive.*
- *Might have* – for past opportunity which we know was not taken. *I might have gone to the drama school, but I chose history instead.*