

# Modal auxiliaries, present and future: ability, certainty, obligation

## Explanations

### Ability

#### Can and be able to

*Be able to* is used in situations where *can* does not have the necessary grammatical form.

*I'd like to be able to swim. Not being able to swim is annoying.*

### Certainty and uncertainty

#### 1. Must and can't

These are used to make deductions, when we are more or less certain about something, especially with the verb *to be*.

*You must be tired after your journey.* (I suppose you are)

*That can't be Sue. She's in Brazil.* (I'm sure it's impossible)

#### 2. May, might and could

These all express uncertainty or possibility. They are usually stressed in speech. *Might* is less likely than *may*. *Could* is not used with *not* in this context.

*It may not rain. I might go out, I don't know. I could get wet!*

#### 3. Be bound to

This refers to the future, whereas *must* refers to the present.

*You're bound to see Paula if you go there.* (I'm sure you will)

*You must see Paula if you go there.* (An obligation)

### Obligation

#### 1. Must and have to

*Have to* describes obligations made by someone else, while *must* is used to describe a personal obligation. There may be no difference.

*You must start working harder!* (I say so)

*You have to turn left here.* (It's the law)

*Sorry, I must leave / have to leave now.* (No difference)

#### 2. Mustn't and don't have to

*Mustn't* describes something which is not allowed. *Don't have to* describes something which is not necessary.

*You mustn't leave any bags here.* (It's against the rules)

*You don't have to apply yet.* (It's not necessary)

### 3. Should and ought to

These have the same meaning. They describe 'what is a good idea' and can be used to give advice, or polite instructions.

*I think you **should** see a doctor      You **ought not to** continue.  
You **should send in** your application by July 18th.*

### 4. Should as expectation

*Should* can also describe actions we expect to happen.

*Brenda **should be** home by now.      (She is expected to be)*

### 5. Had better

This refers to present or future time, and gives advice about how to stop something going wrong.

*I think you'd **better leave** now. (Before it is too late)  
You'd **better not drive**. (It might be dangerous)*

### 6. Is / Are to

This is used in formal instructions. *Not* is stressed.

*No-one **is to leave** the room.      You **are not to leave** the room.*

## 1. Choose the most suitable word or phrase underlined. The example is done for you.

1. There's someone at the door. It can be / must be the postman.
2. Don't worry, you don't have to / mustn't pay now.
3. I think you had better / would better take a pullover with you.
4. Jones could be / must be president if Smith has to resign.
5. Sorry, I can't stay any longer. I have to go / might go.
6. It was 5 o'clock an hour ago. Your watch can't be / mustn't be right.
7. It's a school rule, all the pupils have to wear / must wear a uniform.
8. I suppose that our team must win / should win, but I'm not sure.
9. Let's tell Diana. She could not / might not know.
10. In my opinion, the government might do / should do something about this.

## 2. Complete the second sentence so that it has similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Use between two to five words.

1. I think you should give up smoking immediately. /had/  
I think you had better give up smoking immediately.
2. I expect we will get there by 5.00, if there isn't too much traffic. /should/  
We should be/get there by 5.00, if there isn't too much traffic.
3. Is it necessary for me to bring my passport? /have/  
Do I have to bring you my passport?
4. I'm sure that cat is in the house somewhere. /be/  
The cat must be in the house somewhere.
5. An aerial is not required with this radio. /have/

- You don't have to have/use an aerial with this radio.
6. It is very inconvenient if you can't drive. /to/  
It's very inconvenient if you are unable to drive.
7. I am sure that John is not the thief. /be/  
John can't be the thief.
8. I am certain that Norman will be late. /bound/  
Norman is bound to be late.
9. All students should report to the main hall at 9.00. /are/  
All students are to report to the main hall at 9:00.
10. I thought that you would know better. /ought/  
You ought to know better!

### 3. Choose the most suitable word or phrase underlined.

1. We can't be lost. It isn't allowed / I don't believe it.
2. Jane is bound to be late. She always is/She must be.
3. Late-comers are to report to the main office. It's a good idea/It's the rule.
4. You don't have to stay unless it's necessary/if you don't want to
5. Astronauts must feel afraid sometimes. They're supposed to / It's only natural.
6. You can't come in here. It isn't allowed/I don't believe it.
7. All motorcyclists have to wear crash helmets. It's a good idea/It's the rule.
8. I ought not to tell Jack. It's not a good idea/It's the rule.
9. We should be there soon. I expect so/It's absolutely certain.
10. You'd better leave now. That's my advice/That's an order.

### 4. Complete the second sentence so that it contains *might*, *might not*, *must*, *mustn't*, *can* or *can't*. More than one answer can be possible.

1. Don't stand up in the boat! You might fall in the river.
2. Sue says she's stuck in the traffic and she might be late.
3. You really must start spending more time on your work.
4. Tell Peter he can stay the night here if he wants to.
5. That's a really stupid idea! You can't be serious, surely!
6. You might not realise it, but this is very important to me.
7. Don't be silly. You can't expect me to believe you!
8. We're not sure but we might go to Prague for Christmas this year.
9. Me learn to fly! You must be joking.
10. Bill cooked the lunch, so you mustn't expect anything special!

5. Rewrite each sentence so that it contains *can*, *could*, *must*, *have to*, or *should* (including negative forms).

1. I'm sure that Helen feels really lonely.

Helen must feel really lonely.

2. You're not allowed to park here.

You can't/mustn't park here.

3. It would be a good idea if Harry took a holiday.

Harry should take a holiday.

4. I'm sure that Brenda isn't over thirty.

Brenda can't be over thirty.

5. Do I need a different driving license for a motorbike?

Do I have to have a different driving licence for a motorbike?

6. What would you advise me to do.

What do you think I should do?

7. Mary knows how to stand on her head.

Mary can stand on her head.

8. You needn't come with me if you don't want to.

You don't have to come with me if you don't want to.

9. It's possible for anyone to break into this house.

Anybody can/could break into this house.

10. The dentist will see you soon. I don't think he'll be long.

The dentist will see you soon. He shouldn't be long.

# Modal auxiliaries, **past**: ability, certainty, obligation

## Explanations

### Past ability

1. Could

*Could* describes past ability.

*When I was young, I **could** run very fast.*

2. Could and was able to

*Was able to* describes the ability to successfully complete an action.

*Mary **was able to** help us.* (She actually helped us)

*Mary **could** help us.* (But perhaps she didn't)

### Certainty and uncertainty

1. Must have and can't have

These are used to make deductions about past actions. The *have* form does not change.

*I **must have** left my wallet in the car.* (I am sure I did)

*Jim **can't have** noticed you.* (I am sure he didn't)

2. May have, might have and could have

These express possibility or uncertainty about past actions. The *have* form does not change.

*Jean **might have** missed the train.* (Perhaps she did)

*He **may not have** received the letter.* (Perhaps he didn't)

*You **could have been** killed!* (It was a possibility)

3. Was / Were to have

This describes something which was supposed to happen, but didn't. It is formal in use. The *have* form does not change.

*He **was to have** left yesterday.* (He was supposed to leave, but he didn't)

### Obligation

1. Had to

*Had to* is generally used as the past form of *must*.

*Sorry I'm late, I **had to** take the children to school.*

The question form is *Did you have to?*

***Did you have to** work late yesterday?*

2. Should have and ought to have

These express the speaker's feeling that a mistake was made. The *have* form does not change.

*You **should have** posted the letter yesterday.* (You made a mistake)

*You **shouldn't have** told me the answer.* (You were wrong)

3. Needn't have and didn't need to

Needn't have describes an action which happened, but was unnecessary. The *have* form does not change.

*I needn't have bought more sugar.* (I did, but we had enough)

*I didn't need to buy more sugar.* (I didn't, because we had enough)

## Pronunciation and writing

Have is unstressed or weakly stressed in the past infinitive forms on this page, and cannot be abbreviated in writing.

## Indirect speech

### Must, shall and should

Must is reported as *had to* or *must*. Shall with future reference is reported as *would*. Other uses of shall are reported as *should*.

'You must go.' He told me I **had to go**. He told me I **must go**.

'I shall be there.' He told us he **would be there**.

'Shall I help?' He asked if he **should help**.

### 1. Choose the most suitable response to each comment or question.

- a) A. What did I do wrong?  
B. 1) You shouldn't have connected these two wires / 2) You didn't have to connect these two wires.
- b) A. Why is the dog barking?  
B. 1) It should have heard something. 2) It must have heard something.
- c) A. Why are you home so early?  
B. 1) I needn't have worked this afternoon. 2) I didn't have to work this afternoon.
- d) A. Why did you worry about me? I didn't take any risks.  
B. 1) You must have been injured. / 2) You could have been injured.
- e) A. You forgot my birthday again!  
B. 1) Sorry, I should have looked in my diary. / 2) Sorry, I had to look in my diary.
- f) A. We had a terrible crossing on the boat in a storm.  
B. 1) That didn't have to be very pleasant! / 2) That can't have been very pleasant!
- g) A. Where were you yesterday? You didn't turn up!  
B. 1) I had to go to London. / 2) I must have gone to London.
- h) A. What do you think about the election?  
B. 1) The Freedom Party had to win. / 2) The Freedom Party should have won.
- i) A. There's a lot of food left over from the party, isn't there?  
B. 1) Yes, you couldn't have made so many sandwiches. / 2) Yes, you needn't have made so many sandwiches.
- j) A. What do you think has happened to Tony?  
B. 1) I don't know, he should have got lost. / 2) I don't know, he might have got lost.

2. Complete the second sentence so that has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given. You must use between two and five words.

- a) It wasn't necessary for me to go out after all.  
have  
I needn't have gone out after all.
- b) There was a plan for Jack to become manager, but he left.  
was  
Jack was to have become manager, but he left.
- c) It was a mistake for you to buy that car.  
bought  
You shouldn't have bought that car.
- d) I don't think that Sally enjoyed her holiday.  
have  
Sally can't have enjoyed her holiday.
- e) It's possible that Bill saw me.  
may  
Bill may have seen me.
- f) I'm sure that Karen was a beautiful baby.  
been  
Karen must have been a beautiful baby.
- g) Perhaps Alan didn't mean what he said.  
meant  
Alan might not have meant what he said.
- h) It's possible that I left my wallet at home.  
could  
I could have left my wallet at home.
- i) I think you were wrong to sell your bike.  
shouldn't  
You shouldn't have sold your bike.
- j) The only thing I could do was run away!  
had  
I had to run away!

3. Choose the most suitable phrase underlined.

- a) We should have turned left. We've missed the turning / We followed the instructions.
- b) We didn't have to wear uniform at school. But I never did / That's why I liked it.
- c) The butler must have stolen the jewels. He was ordered to / There is no other explanation.
- d) You could have phoned from the station. I'm sure you did / Why didn't you?
- e) You needn't have bought any dog food. There isn't any / There is plenty.
- f) Ann might not have understood the message. I suppose it's possible / She wasn't supposed to.
- g) You can't have spent all the money already! You weren't able to / I'm sure you haven't.
- h) I shouldn't have used this kind of paint. It's the right kind / It's the wrong kind.

4. Rewrite each sentence so that it contains can't, might, must, should or needn't.

- a) I'm sure that David took your books by mistake.  
David must have taken your books by mistake.
- b) It was a mistake to park outside the police station.  
You shouldn't have parked outside the police station.
- c) It was unnecessary for you to clean the floor.  
You needn't have cleaned this floor.
- d) I'm sure that Liz hasn't met Harry before.  
Liz can't have met Harry before.
- e) Ann possibly hasn't left yet.  
Ann might not have left yet.
- f) I'm sure they haven't eaten all the food. It's not possible!  
They can't have eaten all the food.
- g) Jack is supposed to have arrived half an hour ago.  
Jack should have arrived half an hour ago.
- h) Perhaps Pam and Tim decided not to come.  
Pam and Tim might have decided not to come.
- h) I think it was the cat that took the fish from the table!  
The cat must have taken the fish from the table.
- j) It was a waste of time worrying, after all!  
You needn't have worried after all.

4. Look carefully at each line. Some lines are correct, but some have a word which should not be there. Tick each correct line. If a line has a word which should not be there, write the word in the space.

Zoo Escape Shocks Residents

Residents in the Blackwood area complained last	✓
night that they should have had been warned about	had
the escape of a dangerous snake. The snake, a python,	1. ✓
is three meters long, and can to kill pets. 'I heard	2. to
about it on the radio,' said Mrs. Agnes Bird. 'I had gone	3. gone
to lock my dog in the kitchen this morning, because	4. ✓
I thought the snake could easily have attack it. Now	5. have
I am not sure what I ought to be do.' The snake, called	6. be
Lulu, disappeared from Blackwood Zoo. 'It must be	7. be
have found a hole in the wall, or it might have been	8. been
slipped out while the door was open,' said zoo director	9. ✓
Basil Hart. Mr. Hart said that people didn't needn't have	10. didn't
been alarmed. 'A local radio station must have had	11. had
mixed up its reports,' he went on. 'We found Lulu a	12. ✓
few minutes after we missed her. We have had to climb	13. have
a tree and bring her down. So you see, you should have	14. have
never believe silly stories you hear on the radio!	15. ✓