

Modal Verbs (modal auxiliaries)

Can, Could, Be able to

Can and could are modal auxiliary verbs. Be able to is NOT an auxiliary verb (it uses the verb be as a main verb). We include be able to here for convenience.

Can

Can is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use can to:

- talk about possibility and ability
- make requests
- ask for or give permission

Structure of Can

Quote:

subject + can + main verb

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without "to").

subject _____ auxiliary verb _____ main verb

+ ___ I _____ can _____ play tennis.

- ___ He _____ cannot / can't _____ play tennis.

? ___ Can you _____ play tennis?

Notice that:

Can is invariable. There is only one form of can.

The main verb is always the bare infinitive.

Use of Can

can: [Possibility and Ability](#)

We use can to talk about what is possible, what we are able or free to do:

She can drive a car.

John can speak Spanish.

I cannot hear you. (I can't hear you.)

Can you hear me?

Normally, we use can for the present. But it is possible to use can when we make present decisions about future ability.

Can you help me with my homework? (present)

Sorry. I'm busy today. But I can help you tomorrow. (future)

can: [Requests and Orders](#)

We often use can in a question to ask somebody to do something. This is not a real question - we do not really want to know if the person is able to do something, we want them to do it! The use of can in this way is informal (mainly between friends and family):

Can you make a cup of coffee, please.

Can you put the TV on.

Can you come here a minute.

Can you be quiet!

can: [Permission](#)

We sometimes use can to ask or give permission for something:

Can I smoke in this room?

You can't smoke here, but you can smoke in the garden.

(Note that we also use could, may, might for permission. The use of can for permission is informal.)

Could

Could is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use could to:

- talk about past possibility or ability
- make requests

Structure of Could

Quote:

subject + could + main verb

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without "to").

subject **auxiliary verb** **main verb**

+ ___ His grandmother _____ could _____ swim.

- ___ She _____ could not / couldn't _____ walk.

? ___ Could his grandmother _____ swim?

Notice that:

Could is invariable. There is only one form of could.
The main verb is always the bare infinitive.

Use of Could

could: Past Possibility or Ability

We use could to talk about what was possible in the past, what we were able or free to do:

I could swim when I was 5 years old.

My grandmother could speak seven languages.

When we arrived home, we could not open the door. (...couldn't open the door.)

Could you understand what he was saying?

We use could (positive) and couldn't (negative) for general ability in the past. But when we talk about one special occasion in the past, we use be able to (positive) and couldn't (negative). Look at these examples:

General :

My grandmother could speak Spanish.

My grandmother couldn't speak Spanish.

Specific Occasion :

A man fell into the river yesterday. The police were able to save him.

A man fell into the river yesterday. The police couldn't save him.

could: Requests

We often use could in a question to ask somebody to do something. The use of could in this way is fairly polite (formal):

Could you tell me where the bank is, please?

Could you send me a catalogue, please?

Shall versus Will

People may sometimes tell you that there is no difference between shall and will, or even that today nobody uses shall (except in offers such as "Shall I call a taxi?"). This is not really true. The difference between shall and will is often hidden by the fact that we usually contract them in speaking with 'll. But the difference does exist.

The truth is that there are two conjugations for the verb will:

1st Conjugation (objective, simple statement of fact)

<u>Person</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Contraction</u>
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Singular :

I _____	shall _____	I shall be in London tomorrow. _____	I'll
you _____	will _____	You will see a large building on the left. _____	You'll
he, she, it _____	will _____	He will be wearing blue. _____	He'll

Plural :

we _____	shall _____	We shall not be there when you arrive. _____	We shan't
you _____	will _____	You will find his office on the 7th floor. _____	You'll
they _____	will _____	They will arrive late. _____	They'll

2nd Conjugation (subjective, strong assertion, promise or command)

<u>Person</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Contraction</u>
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Singular :

I _____	will _____	I will do everything possible to help. _____	I'll
you _____	shall _____	You shall be sorry for this. _____	You'll
he, she, it _____	shall _____	It shall be done. _____	It'll

Plural :

we _____	will _____	We will not interfere. _____	We won't
you _____	shall _____	You shall do as you're told. _____	You'll
they _____	shall _____	They shall give one month's notice. _____	They'll

It is true that this difference is not universally recognized. However, let those who make assertions such as "People in the USA never use 'shall'" peruse a good US English dictionary, or many US legal documents which often contain phrases such as:

Each party shall give one month's notice in writing in the event of termination.

Note that exactly the same rule applies in the case of should and would. It is perfectly normal, and somewhat more elegant, to write, for example:

I should be grateful if you would kindly send me your latest catalogue.

Be able to

Although we look at be able to here, it is not a modal verb. It is simply the verb be plus an adjective (able) followed by the infinitive. We look at be able to here because we sometimes use it instead of can and could.

We use be able to:

- to talk about ability

Structure of Be able to

Quote:

The structure of be able to is:
subject + be + able + infinitive

subject be (main verb) able (adjective) infinitive

+ ___ I _____ am _____ able _____ to drive.

- ___ She ___ is not / isn't _____ able _____ to drive.

? _____ Are you _____ able _____ to drive?

Notice that be able to is possible in all tenses, for example:

I was able to drive...

I will be able to drive...

I have been able to drive...

Notice too that be able to has an infinitive form:

I would like to be able to speak Chinese.

Use of Be able to

Be able to is not a modal auxiliary verb. We include it here for convenience, because it is often used like "can" and "could", which are modal auxiliary verbs.

be able to: [ability](#)

We use be able to to express ability. "Able" is an adjective meaning: having the power, skill or means to do something. If we say "I am able to swim", it is like saying "I can swim". We sometimes use "be able to" instead of "can" or "could" for ability. "Be able to" is possible in all tenses—but "can" is possible only in the present and "could" is possible only in the past for ability. In addition, "can" and "could" have no infinitive form. So we use "be able to" when we want to use other tenses or the infinitive. Look at these examples:

I have been able to swim since I was five. (present perfect)

You will be able to speak perfect English very soon. (future simple)

I would like to be able to fly an airplane. (infinitive)

Note: Be able to is not a modal auxiliary verb. We include it here for convenience, because it is often used like "can" and "could", which are modal auxiliary verbs.

Have to, Must, Must not/Mustn't

Must is a modal auxiliary verb.

Have to is NOT an auxiliary verb (it uses the verb have as a main verb). We include have to here for convenience.

Have to (objective obligation)

We often use have to to say that something is obligatory, for example:

- Children have to go to school.

Structure of Have to

Have to is often grouped with modal auxiliary verbs for convenience, but in fact it is not a modal verb. It is not even an auxiliary verb. In the have to structure, "have" is a main verb. The structure is:

Quote:

subject + auxiliary verb + have + infinitive (with to)

Look at these examples in the simple tense:

subject auxiliary verb main verb have infinitive (with to)

She _____ has _____ to work.
I _____ do not _____ have _____ to see the doctor.
_____ Did you _____ have _____ to go to school?

Use of Have to

In general, have to expresses impersonal obligation. The subject of have to is obliged or forced to act by a separate, external power (for example, the Law or school rules). Have to is objective. Look at these examples:

- In France, you have to drive on the right.
- In England, most schoolchildren have to wear a uniform.
- John has to wear a tie at work.

In each of the above cases, the obligation is not the subject's opinion or idea. The obligation is imposed from outside.

We can use have to in all tenses, and also with modal auxiliaries. We conjugate it just like any other main verb. Here are some examples:

past simple ~ I had to work yesterday.
present simple ~ I have to work today.
future simple ~ I will have to work tomorrow.
present continuous ~ She is having to wait.
present perfect ~ We have had to change the time.

modal (may) ~ They may have to do it again.

Must (subjective obligation)

We often use must to say that something is essential or necessary, for example:

- I must go.

Structure of Must

Quote:

Must is a modal auxiliary verb. It is followed by a main verb. The structure is:

subject + must + main verb

The main verb is the base verb (infinitive without "to").

Look at these examples:

subject auxiliary must main verb

I _____ must _____ go home.

You _____ must _____ visit us.

We _____ must _____ stop now.

Like all auxiliary verbs, must CANNOT be followed by to. So, we say:

I must go now. (not *I must to go now.)

Use of Must

In general, must expresses personal obligation. Must expresses what the speaker thinks is necessary. Must is subjective. Look at these examples:

I must stop smoking.
You must visit us soon.
He must work harder.

In each of the above cases, the "obligation" is the opinion or idea of the person speaking. In fact, it is not a real obligation. It is not imposed from outside.

We can use must to talk about the present or the future. Look at these examples:

I must go now. (present)
I must call my mother tomorrow. (future)

We cannot use must to talk about the past. We use have to to talk about the past