

# May vs might: possibility and permission

CEFR B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

May sounds a little more likely and a little more formal. Might sounds more remote and tentative. Both never take to.

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## The rule

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### Possibility: the confidence gap

- Both may and might mean that something is possible, but not certain: "She may be at home", "She might be at home."
- May suggests a slightly stronger chance; might suggests it is less likely or more remote.
- The two verbs are usually interchangeable, so no test answer is wrong just because it chose might over may.
- Do not add to after either verb: "It may rain", not "It may to rain."

### May for permission

- May asks and gives permission in a formal or polite way: "May I open the window?"
- You may not is the formal refusal: "You may not park on this street."
- In everyday speech, can is more common for permission. May sounds more careful and formal.
- Permission answers often drop the verb: "May I go?" — "Yes, you may" or "No, you may not."

### Might for suggestions and requests

- Might makes a very polite suggestion: "You might try the soup."
- Could sometimes replaces might in suggestions, while may does not work there.
- Might I ask a question? is extremely formal and rare, but it shows the polite edge of the word.
- Might also softens a complaint: "You might have told me earlier."

### Past possibility with have

- May have and might have plus the past participle describe possibilities in the past: "He may have left already."
- Might have is also used for unrealised possibilities and gentle reproach: "You might have warned me."
- Both forms are common in speculation: "She might have missed the bus."
- For a certain deduction, use must have; for impossibility, use cannot have.

### May not and might not

- May not can mean two things: not permitted, or possibly not true. Context decides.
- Might not only talks about possibility: "It might not work."

- In negatives, might not sounds more naturally uncertain than may not.
- The past negatives are may not have and might not have plus the participle.

## Questions

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Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. It \_\_\_ rain this afternoon, so take an umbrella.

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2. She \_\_\_ be at home; her lights are on.

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3. \_\_\_ I open the window, please?

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4. You \_\_\_ not park on this street; it is forbidden.

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5. You \_\_\_ want to check the timetable before you leave.

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6. He \_\_\_ have left already; his coat is gone.

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7. She \_\_\_ have taken the wrong train.

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8. You \_\_\_ have told me that the meeting was cancelled.

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9. We \_\_\_ not have enough chairs for everyone.

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10. It \_\_\_ not snow after all; the sky is clearing.

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11. Which sentence is correct?

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12. \_\_\_ you pass me the salt, please?

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13. He \_\_\_ have gone home; his desk is empty.

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14. She might \_\_\_ at home tonight.

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15. You may \_\_\_ here if you buy a ticket.

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16. I \_\_\_ finish the report tonight, but I am not sure.

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17. Customers \_\_\_ ask for a refund within 30 days.

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18. That \_\_\_ be true; it sounds impossible.

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19. It is late. She \_\_\_ have forgotten the appointment.

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20. Guests \_\_\_ use the garden during the day.

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## Answer key

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1. **may** — May expresses a future possibility and takes the base verb *rain* without *to*.
2. **may** — May expresses a present possibility, followed directly by the base verb.
3. **May** — May asks for permission in a formal and polite way.
4. **may** — May not gives a formal refusal of permission.
5. **might** — Might makes a gentle suggestion, which fits the friendly advice.
6. **may** — May have plus the past participle *left* describes a past possibility.
7. **might** — Might have plus the participle expresses a less certain past possibility.
8. **might** — Might have softens a complaint about a past action.
9. **may** — May not expresses a possible negative situation in the present.
10. **might** — Might not looks at an uncertain future possibility.
11. **It may rain later.** — May takes the base verb without *to*: *It may rain later* is the correct modal pattern.
12. **Could** — A request for help uses *could*, because *may* asks for permission.
13. **may** — May have plus the participle *gone* expresses a present guess about the past.
14. **stay** — *Might* is a modal, so the base form *stay* follows it directly.
15. **park** — *May* for permission takes the base verb *park* without *to*.
16. **may** — May expresses an uncertain possibility about the future.
17. **may** — May states formal permission in a written policy.
18. **may not** — May not expresses the possibility that something is not true.
19. **might** — Might have plus the participle *forgotten* expresses a past possibility.
20. **may** — May gives formal permission, followed by the base verb *use*.