

Modal verbs: can, could, must, should, may

CEFR A2-B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

No -s, no to, no do: what modals share, and which one fits each job.

The rule

What modal verbs share

- The modals are can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would. Ought to works like a modal.
- They never take -s: she can swim, not she cans swim.
- They are followed by the base verb without to: you must go, not you must to go.
- They make questions and negatives without do: Can you help? She cannot come. You must not smoke here.
- Two modals cannot meet: use be able to, have to or be allowed to instead. "I will be able to come", not "I will can come".

Ability: can and could

- Can is ability in the present: "I can swim."
- Could is general ability in the past: "She could read music when she was six."
- For one successful action in the past, use was able to or managed to: "The fire was fierce, but we were able to escape."
- For the future and perfect tenses, use be able to: "I will be able to help tomorrow", "I have been able to finish."

Permission and requests: can, could, may

- Can is normal and informal for permission: "Can I borrow your pen?"
- Could is more polite: "Could you close the window, please?"
- May is formal: "May I come in?" It is the right choice with strangers, officials and in writing.
- For prohibition, use cannot or must not: "You cannot park here."

Obligation: must, have to and the two negatives

- Must shows a strong obligation from the speaker or from a rule: "You must wear a helmet."
- Have to shows an obligation from outside: "I have to work on Saturday because my boss asked."
- In practice the two often mean the same thing. The past of both is had to: "I had to leave early."
- Must not means it is forbidden: "You must not touch that switch."
- Do not have to means there is no obligation: "You do not have to come, but you are welcome." These two are opposites.

Advice and possibility: should, may, might, could

- Should and ought to give advice: "You should sleep more."
- May, might and could show possibility. Might is the most tentative: "It may rain", "It might rain", "It could rain".
- Degrees of certainty: must be (almost sure), may be or might be (possible), cannot be (impossible).
- "He must be tired" means I am sure he is tired. "He cannot be tired" means I am sure he is not.
- For past deduction, use modal plus have plus participle: "She must have missed the bus."

Questions

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

1. She ___ play the violin when she was eight.

2. ___ you help me carry these boxes?

3. You ___ wear a helmet on a building site. It is the law.

4. I ___ go to the dentist yesterday because my tooth hurt.

5. You ___ bring a towel. The hotel provides them.

6. That ___ be John at the door. He is in Spain this week.

7. You ___ drink more water if you get headaches.

8. ___ I open the window? It is very warm in here.

9. She ___ be at home. I saw her car in the driveway.

10. I ___ swim when I was five, but I learnt quickly.

11. The train has gone. We ___ have missed it.

12. Students ___ use dictionaries during the exam. It is not allowed.

13. ___ you speak more slowly, please?

14. I ___ go to the meeting tomorrow. I have no choice.

15. You look tired. You ___ go to bed earlier.

16. He ___ be at the office. It is Sunday, and he never works Sundays.

17. Passengers ___ smoke anywhere on the plane.

18. We ___ finish the project by Friday, or the client will be angry.

19. She ___ have taken the wrong train. She is not answering her phone.

20. When I was a child, I ___ climb that tree easily.

Answer key

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1. **could** — General ability in the past uses could.
2. **Can** — Modal verbs make questions without do: Can you help?
3. **must** — A rule and a strong obligation take must.
4. **had to** — The past of must and have to is had to.
5. **do not have to** — There is no obligation, so use do not have to. Must not would mean it is forbidden.
6. **cannot** — Cannot shows that something is impossible. Must would mean I am almost sure it is him.
7. **should** — Should is used to give advice.
8. **May** — May is the formal, polite way to ask for permission. Can is also correct but less formal.
9. **must** — Must shows strong certainty that something is true.
10. **could not** — Could not is lack of ability in the past. Must not and should not are about obligation, not ability.
11. **must** — Past deduction uses must have plus the past participle: we must have missed it.
12. **must not** — Not allowed means prohibition, so use must not.
13. **Could** — Could makes a polite request. Should would ask about obligation.
14. **have to** — No choice means an outside obligation: have to.
15. **should** — Should gives friendly advice.
16. **cannot** — Cannot expresses certainty that something is impossible. The facts make his presence at the office impossible.
17. **must not** — A rule that forbids something takes must not. Should not is advice, and do not have to means it is not required.
18. **must** — A strong obligation with a consequence takes must.
19. **must** — Must have plus the past participle shows a confident guess about the past.
20. **could** — Could describes general ability in the past.