

# The Modal Verbs

The modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, shall, should, will* and *would*.

The modals are used to do things like talking about ability, asking permission, making requests, and so on.

## Ability:

We use *can* to talk about someone's skill or general abilities:

She **can speak** several languages.

He **can swim** like a fish.

They **can't dance** very well.

We use *can* to talk about the ability to do something at a given time in the **present** or **future**:

You **can make** a lot of money if you are lucky.

Help. I **can't breathe**.

They **can run** but they **can't hide**.

We use *could* to talk about **past** time:

She **could speak** several languages.

They **couldn't dance** very well.

We use *could have* to say that someone had the ability/opportunity to do something, but did **not** do it:

She **could have learned** Swahili, but she didn't have time.

I **could have danced** all night [but didn't].

## Permission:

We use *can* to ask for permission to do something:

**Can I ask** a question, please?

**Can we go** home now?

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*could* is more formal and **polite** than *can*:

**Could I ask** a question please?  
**Could we go** home now?

*may* is another **more formal** and polite way of asking for permission:

**May I ask** a question please?  
**May we go** home now?

We use *can* to **give** permission:

**You can go** home now if you like.  
**You can borrow** my pen if you like.

*may* is a **more formal** and polite way of **giving** permission:

**You may go** home now, if you like.

We use *can* to say that **someone has permission** to do something:

**We can go out** whenever we want.  
Students **can travel** free.

*may* is a **more formal** and polite way of saying that **someone has permission**:

Students **may travel** free.

**Instructions and requests:**

We use *could you* and *would you* as polite ways of telling or asking someone to **do something**:

**Could you take** a message please?  
**Would you carry** this for me please?  
**Could I have** my bill please?

*can* and *will* are less polite:

**Can you take** a message please?

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Will you carry this for me please?

## Suggestions and advice:

We use *should* to make suggestions and give advice:

You **should send** an email.

We **should go** by train.

We use *could* to make suggestions:

We **could meet** at the weekend.

You **could eat out** tonight.

We use *conditionals* to give advice:

Dan **will help** you if you ask him.

**Past tenses** are more **polite**:

Dan **would help** you if **you asked** him.

## Offers and invitations:

We use *can I...* and to make offers:

**Can I help** you?

**Can I do** that for you?

We can also use *shall I ...*

**Shall I help** you with that?

**Shall I call** you on your mobile?

We sometimes say *I can ...* or *I could ...* or *I'll (I will) ...* to make an **offer**:

**I can do** that for you if you like.

**I can give** you a lift to the station.

**I'll do** that for you if you like.

**I'll give** you a lift to the station.

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We use *would you like (to) ...* for invitations:

**Would you like to** come round tomorrow?  
**Would you like** another drink?

We use *you must* or *we must* for a **very polite invitation**:

**You must come** round and see us.  
**We must meet** again soon.

## Obligation and necessity

We use *must* to say that it is necessary to do something:

You **must stop** at a red light.  
Everyone **must bring** something to eat.  
You can wear what you like, but you **must look** neat and tidy.  
I'm sorry, but you **mustn't make** a noise in here.

We use *had to* for this if we are talking about the past:

Everyone **had to bring** something to eat.  
We could wear what we liked, but we **had to look** neat and tidy.