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with **Dr Jonathan**



Modal Verbs
(Level: Intermediate)



What Are Modal Verbs?

They are auxiliary verbs that indicate possibilities.

They are followed by another verb in its infinitive form without “to” (e.g., can go).

They have only one form (no -ed, -ing, etc. endings).

They are combined with “do,” “does,” or “did” to form questions.

They are combined with “not” (without “do,” “does,” or “did”) to form negations.

Common Modal Verbs

be able to, can, could, has/have to, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would

Verbs that sometimes act like modals (called “semimodals”)

dare, had better, need, once, ought to, and used to

Three Types of Possibilities



Deontic possibilities

social/external freedom, obligation, permission, etc.

Dynamic possibilities

personal/internal ability, willingness, etc.

Epistemic possibilities

true or false

Deontic:

Modal Verbs: Can & Could

- "You can come in the room now."
 - Meaning: "You are allowed/permitted to come in the room now."
- "You could have come in the room, if you had been there."
 - "It would have been allowed for you to come into the room, if you had been there."

Dynamic:

Usually sounds more certain/definite than "may" or "might"

- "She can run very fast."
 - "She definitely is able or willing to run very fast."
- "She could [have] run very fast, when she was young."
 - "She definitely was able or willing to run very fast, when she was young."

Epistemic:

- "Yes, that can/could be [said to be] true" and "Yes, you could say that."
 - "Yes, that is likely/possibly true."

"Can" is present tense.

"Could" is conditional or perfective past tense.

Exceptions & Idioms:

- In general, "could" can express more doubt than "can."
- "Could" can also mean a circumstance (e.g., "The storm could delay our trip.").
- "This could work" means that something could/might/should be a solution to a problem, go according to a plan or theory, or meet some hope or expectation.



Modal Verbs: May & Might

Deontic:

- "You may come in the room now" is a formal version of "You can come in the room now."
- "You might have come in the room, if you had been there" is a formal version of "You could have come into the room, if you had been there."
- "Might" is softer and more polite than "may," when asking for permission.
 - "May I go with you?" is a little harder/harsher than "Might I go with you?"

Dynamic: Usually sounds less certain/definite than "can" or "could."

- "She may/might run very fast."
 - "She may or may not be able or willing to run very fast."
- "She might have run very fast, when she was young."
 - "It is possible that she ran very fast, when she was young."
 - "Might have" can also mean "She did not run very fast, but she could have run very fast, when she was young." The second sense can imply the deontic/permission to run.

Epistemic:

- "Yes, that may/might be true" and "Yes, you might say that" are formal versions of the "can" and "could" versions.
- "He may/might be bigger and stronger than I am, but he is not smarter."
 - "Though it is possible/true that he is bigger and stronger than I am, nevertheless he is not smarter (more intelligent) than I am."

"May" is present tense.

"Might" is conditional or perfective past tense.



Exceptions & Idioms:

- In general, "might" can express more doubt than "may."
- Like "could," "may" and "might" can be used to mean a circumstance (e.g., "The storm may/might delay our trip.") In the southern US, some people say "might could" to add emphasis or formality (e.g., "The storm might could delay our trip.").
- In formal or British English, "might have" can mean "should have" (e.g., "You know, you might have said something kind to them. They were very helpful.")
- "May" is also used in the subjunctive mood to express a hope or wish (see the "Verb Moods" lesson): "May you live long" means "I hope/wish for you to live long."
- "This might work" means that something could/might/should be a solution to a problem, go according to a plan or theory, or meet some hope or expectation.

Modal Verbs: Will & Would

Deontic:

- "You will do as you are told."
 - "You are obligated/required to follow the instructions told/given to you (or you will be punished)." This is giving someone an order/command.
- "He would do as he was told[, if he could]."
 - "He would follow the instructions given to him, if he were able."

Dynamic:

- "He will stop by" can have either of these meanings:
 - "He will definitely come to see you/someone" (a certainty), or
 - "He usually stops by" (a habit or pattern).
- "He would stop by[, if he could]."
 - "If he were able to come, he definitely would come to see you/someone."

Epistemic:

- "He will do his best."
 - "It is true that he will make his best effort/attempt."
- "He would do his best[, in such a case]."
 - "In some circumstance, it is true that he would try to make his best effort/attempt."

"Will" is present tense.

"Would" is conditional or perfective past tense.

Exceptions & Idioms:

- "Will" can mean habitual or expected behavior: "[The phone rings.] That will be Pam calling; she said she would call at this time."
- "Would" can mean habitual behavior in the past: "When I was a kid, we would go to the lake every summer."
- "Would like" is a polite way of saying "want:" "I would like some water, please."
- "Would you" is another polite phrase: "[The phone rings.] Would you please answer that [phone]?"



Modal Verbs: Shall & Should

Deontic:

- "You shall do as you are told" is a formal version of "You will do as you are told."
- "He should do as he is told."
 - "He is obligated to do as he is told." This politely gives advice.

Dynamic:

- "He shall come by" is a formal version of "He will come/stop by."
- "He should come by[, if he can]."
 - "He is expected to come by, if he is able."

Epistemic:

- "He shall do his best" is a formal version of "He will do his best."
- "He should do his best[, in such a case]."
 - "In some circumstance, it is true that he ought to do his best."

"Shall" is present tense.

"Should" is conditional or perfective past tense.



Exceptions & Idioms:

- Shall (more in British English) or should (more in American English) are often used as question words: "Shall/should we go see a movie tonight?"
- "This should work" means that something could/might/should be a solution to a problem, go according to a plan or theory, or meet some hope or expectation.

Modal Verbs: Has/have to & Must



Deontic:

- "You must do your job" or "You have to do your job."
 - "It is required that you do your job."

Dynamic:

- "You must be strong to climb a mountain" or "You have to be strong...."
 - "You need strong mental and physical abilities to climb a mountain."

Epistemic:

- "This must be an expensive house" or "This has to be...."
 - "I deduce/infer [from what I have seen] that this house is expensive."

Modal Verbs: Be Able to



Deontic:

- "We have not been able to go outside since the war began."
 - "We have not had the freedom, safety, or permission to go outside since the war began."

Dynamic:

- "I was able to go for a run this morning."
 - "I was mentally willing and/or physically able to go for a run this morning."

Epistemic:

- "I was able to finish my work this week."
 - "It is true that I was able to finish my work this week."

Deontic: Semimodal Verbs: Dare



- "I dare you to break the rules."
 - "I challenge you to risk breaking the rules [without permission, to express your freedom, etc]."

Dynamic:

- "Dare I break the rules?"
 - "Should I be willing to break the rules?"

Epistemic:

- "Yes, I dared him to break the rules."
 - Someone is admitting that it is true that they dared someone else to break the rules.

Idioms:

- **American:** "How dare you!" means to express shock, dismay, anger, etc. that someone did something very offensive. For example, if a man walked into a women's shower, the women might quickly cover themselves and say "How dare you come in here! Get out!"
- **British:** "I dare say..." is a polite way to give your opinion: "I dare say, he was wrong about that."

Semimodal Verbs: Had Better



Similar to "should" and "ought to," "had better" means an efficiency, obligation, or recommendation.

Deontic: "I had better go to work today, or my boss will get angry" means "I have an obligation to go to work today, or my boss will get angry."

Dynamic: "I had better follow my doctor's orders, or my health will get worse" means "I should follow my doctor's recommendation(s), or my health will get worse."

Epistemic: "We had better take the shorter route to the airport, or we will miss our flight" means "It is true that we should take an efficient way to the airport, or we will miss our flight."

Semimodal Verbs: Need



Similar to "has/have to" and "must," "need" expresses a necessity or obligation. These usages are more common in British English than in American.

Deontic: "Need I come into work today?" means "Is it a necessity or obligation that I come into work today?"

Dynamic: "Need I be willing to go to the party tonight?" means "Is it a necessity or obligation that I am/be willing to go to the party?"

Epistemic: "That need not be true" means "That is not necessarily true. It may be false."

Semimodal Verbs: Ought to



Similar to "should," "ought to" means an expectation or obligation.

Deontic: "He ought to do as he is told" means "He is obligated to do as he is told."

Dynamic: "He ought to come by" means "He is expected to come by."

Epistemic: "That ought to be true" means "That is expected to be true."

Deontic: Semimodal Verbs: Used to & Once



- "I used to be free of this place."
 - "There was a time in the past when I was not bound by/to this place (e.g., a certain job, a prison, etc.)."

Dynamic:

- "I once was able to run long distances."
 - "In the past, I was able to run long distances."

Epistemic:

- "That used to be true."
 - "That was true in the past, but may no longer be true."

Idiom:

"Did I/we used to...?" is a common type of questioning sentence.

For example: "Did we used to know each other?" means "Were we friends, coworkers, etc. in the past?"



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