

**UNDERSTANDING MODAL VERBS AND MODALITY IN ENGLISH
GRAMMAR**

Student: Teshayeva Yulduz

2nd year student at Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Faculty 1 , Group 2308

Scientific supervisor: Irgasheva Madina

Abstract: *This article explores the concept of modal verbs and modality in English grammar, focusing on how they express various attitudes, such as possibility, necessity, permission, and obligation. Modal verbs, including "can," "could," "may," "might," "must," "should," "will," and "would," are auxiliary verbs that modify the meaning of the main verb, allowing for nuanced communication. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of each modal verb, highlighting its usage, examples, and function in different contexts, such as making requests, offering suggestions, and expressing hypothetical situations. Additionally, the concept of modality is discussed, emphasizing its role in conveying uncertainty, probability, or obligation through both verbal and lexical expressions. This study offers valuable insights for learners and educators seeking a deeper understanding of how modal verbs contribute to the complexity of English communication, helping speakers express a range of meanings from strong certainties to weak possibilities.*

Key words : *modal verbs, modality, auxiliary verbs , ability , possibility , request, advice, strong modality , weak modality , formal vs informal request.*

Introduction

Modal verbs are a type of auxiliary verb that express necessity, possibility, permission, ability, or advice. Modality, on the other hand, refers to the grammatical and lexical means used to express these concepts in language. Together, they help convey the speaker's attitude towards the action or state described in the sentence.

What are Modal Verbs?

Modal verbs are verbs that do not function as main verbs but instead help express ideas such as possibility, necessity, or permission.

Types of Modality Expressed by Modal verbs

1. Can

Meaning: Ability, permission, possibility, and requests.

- **Ability:** "Can" is used to express someone's ability to do something

She can swim very well.* (ability)

- **Permission:** "Can" is also used to ask for or give permission.

Can I borrow your pen?*(request)

You can leave after the meeting.* (permission)

- **Possibility:** "Can" expresses the possibility of something happening.

It can get very cold in the winter here.* (possibility)

- **Informal requests:** "Can" is also commonly used for informal requests.

Can you help me with this task?*

2. Could

Meaning: Past ability, polite requests, suggestions, and possibility.

- **Past Ability:** "Could" is the past form of "can" and expresses ability in the past.

When I was younger, I could run 10 miles easily.* (past ability)

- **Polite Requests:** "Could" is often used to make polite requests.

Could you please open the window?*(polite request)

- **Suggestions:** "Could" can offer a suggestion or possibility.

You could try calling her to confirm.* (suggestion)

- **Possibility:** "Could" indicates possibility in the present or future.

It could rain later today.* (possibility)

- **Conditional Situations:** "Could" is used in hypothetical or conditional situations.

If I had more time, I could help you.* (conditional)

3. May

Meaning: Permission, possibility, and formal requests.

- **Permission:** "May" is more formal than "can" when giving or asking for permission.

May I leave early today?*(request for permission)

You may use my phone.* (permission)

- **Possibility:** "May" expresses a possibility or likelihood, usually in a formal tone.

It may rain this afternoon.* (possibility)

- **Formal Requests:** "May" is sometimes used in formal requests.

May I assist you with something?

4. Might

Meaning: Slight possibility, suggestion, or polite requests.

- **Possibility:** "Might" is used to express a smaller or less certain possibility than "may."

I might go to the party later if I finish my work.* (possibility)

- **Suggestion:** "Might" can suggest something as a possibility or idea.

You might want to check the schedule first.* (suggestion)

- **Polite Requests:** Similar to "may," "might" can be used for polite or tentative requests.

Might I borrow your pen?*(polite request)

5. Must

Meaning: Necessity, strong advice, strong certainty, and obligation.

- **Necessity/Obligation:** "Must" is used to express necessity or obligation, often in the present.

You must finish your homework before going out.* (necessity)

- **Strong Advice:** "Must" can give strong advice or recommendations.

You must see that movie—it's amazing!* (strong advice)

- **Certainty:** "Must" indicates that something is very likely or certain.

She must be at home; I haven't seen her leave.* (certainty)

6. Shall

Meaning: Formal suggestion, future action, and offers (mainly British English).

- **Future Action:** "Shall" is used to indicate future actions, particularly in formal contexts.

I shall arrive at 9 AM tomorrow.* (future action)

- **Formal Suggestions:** "Shall" can be used to make formal suggestions, particularly in questions.

Shall we go for a walk?*(suggestion)

- **Offers:** "Shall" can be used to make an offer or invitation, especially in British English.

Shall I open the window for you?*(offer)

7. Should

Meaning: Advice, recommendation, obligation, and expectation.

- **Advice:** "Should" is commonly used to give advice or make recommendations.

You should drink more water.* (advice)

- **Obligation/Expectation:** "Should" expresses something that is expected or advisable.

You should be more careful with your spending.* (obligation)

- **Expectation:** "Should" can indicate something that is expected to happen.

She should be here by now.* (expectation)

8. Ought to

Meaning: Similar to "should," used for advice, obligation, or expectation.

- **Advice:** "Ought to" is used for giving advice, similar to "should."

You ought to visit your grandmother more often.* (advice)

- **Obligation:** "Ought to" can express a moral obligation.

He ought to apologize for being rude.* (obligation)

- **Expectation:** "Ought to" can express something that is expected.

They ought to arrive at 3 PM.* (expectation)

9. Will

Meaning: Future actions, willingness, strong certainty, and promises.

- **Future Action:** "Will" is used to express future actions or events.

I will go to the store tomorrow.* (future action)

- **Willingness:** "Will" indicates willingness to do something.

I will help you with your homework.* (willingness)

- **Certainty:** "Will" shows strong certainty about something happening.

The sun will rise tomorrow morning.* (certainty)

- **Promises/Offers:** "Will" is also used to make promises or offers.

I will call you when I arrive.* (promise)

10. Would

Meaning: Polite requests, hypothetical situations, and past habitual actions.

- **Polite Requests:** "Would" is commonly used for making polite or formal requests.

Would you mind passing me the salt?*(polite request)

- **Hypothetical Situations:** "Would" is used in conditional sentences to talk about hypothetical or unreal situations.

If I were rich, I would travel the world.* (hypothetical situation)

- **Past Habitual Actions:** "Would" can describe actions that were repeated in the past.

When we were kids, we would visit our grandparents every summer.*
(habitual action)

11. Would Have

Meaning: Past unreal situations or regrets.

- **Unreal Past Situations:** "Would have" is used to talk about what could have happened in the past if circumstances were different.

She would have called you if she had known you were in town.* (unreal past situation)

- **Regrets:** It expresses regret about something that did not happen in the past.

I would have studied harder if I knew the test was so difficult.* (regret)

Characteristics of Modal Verbs

No "s" in third person singular: Unlike other verbs, modals do not take an "s" in the third-person singular form.

- For example, "She **can** sing," **not** "She *cans* sing."

No infinitive or participle forms: Modal verbs do not have an infinitive form ("to **can**" is incorrect) or participle form ("**canned**" is not used in the same way as with regular verbs).

Followed by the base verb: After a modal verb, we use the base form of the main verb.

- For example, "She **should go**," **not** "She *should goes*."

Modality and its types

Modality refers to the way in which a speaker can express their attitude toward the action or state in a sentence. It can be expressed through:

1. Verbal modality

2. Lexical modality

Verbal modality involves the use of modal verbs—auxiliary verbs that modify the main verb in a sentence to express the speaker's attitude toward the action. These modal verbs include words such as “can”, “could”, “may”, “might”, “must”, “should”, “will”, and “would”.

- She **might** go to the party. (uncertainty)
- You **must** see that movie! (necessity)

Lexical modality refers to the use of adjectives, adverbs, and other expressions (not modal verbs) to convey a speaker's attitude toward an action, event, or situation. Common lexical modality expressions include words like “definitely”, “probably”, “certainly”, “perhaps”, “obviously”, and “unlikely”.

- He will **probably** come to the meeting.
- I'm **certainly** going to try my best.

Differences between Strong and Weak modality

Modality can be categorized as strong modality and weak modality.

Strong modality is used when expressing *high certainty, necessity, or obligation*.

- You **must** finish your work now. (conveys urgency and obligation)

Weak modality is used when something is less certain or when there is room for possibility or choice.

- She **might** come to the meeting. (possibility is not define)

Conclusion

Modal verbs are essential in expressing various attitudes, such as possibility, permission, obligation, ability, and advice. Each modal verb has its specific use, which can change based on the context and sentence structure. By mastering modal

verbs and their functions, one can greatly enhance his ability to communicate in English.

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