A2 Modal Verbs and Similar Expressions

Form, function and practical speaking and writing

CAN • HAVE TO • SHOULD • MUST • MIGHT

By the end, you can…

- talk about ability and rules
- give advice
- ask politely
- write a short message

How modal verbs work

Short words, big meanings

BASIC FORM

subject + modal + base verb

I can swim. She should study. We must leave.

After can, should, must, may and might, use the base verb.

IMPORTANT

- No “to” after a modal: I can drive.
- No -s with he / she / it: She can drive.
- Make negatives with not: cannot / can’t.
- Make questions by moving the modal: Can you drive?

Can and can’t

Ability, permission and simple requests

FORM

subject + can / can’t + base verb

FUNCTION

ability, permission, request

EXAMPLE

I can cook.
Can I use your phone?

QUESTIONS

Can you help me?
Yes, I can. / No, I can’t.

COMMON MISTAKE

✗ She can to swim.
✓ She can swim.

QUICK PRACTICE

Complete: My brother ___ speak Arabic.
Answer: can

Could

Past ability and polite requests

FORM

subject + could / couldn’t + base verb

FUNCTION

ability in the past; polite request

EXAMPLE

When I was six, I could read.
Could you open the window?

COMPARE

Can you help me?
Could you help me?

Could sounds more polite.

TRY IT

Make this more polite:
“Give me your pen.”
Could you give me your pen?

Be able to and need to

Useful expressions with a similar meaning

FORM

be + able to + base verb
need to + base verb

FUNCTION

ability in more tenses; necessity

EXAMPLE

I’m able to join today.
You need to bring ID.

WHY USE THEM?

- Use be able to when can does not fit the tense.
- Use need to for something necessary, often personal.

EXAMPLES

I won’t be able to come tomorrow.
Do I need to pay now?
You don’t need to hurry.

Must and mustn’t

Strong rules and strong personal feelings

FORM

subject + must / mustn’t + base verb

FUNCTION

strong obligation; prohibition

EXAMPLE

You must wear a seat belt.
You mustn’t smoke here.

WATCH THE MEANING

mustn’t = it is prohibited
“Don’t do it.”

SIGNS

MUST WEAR HELMET
MUSTN’T USE PHONES
Write one rule for a classroom.

Have to and don’t have to

External rules and no necessity

FORM

subject + have to / don’t have to + base verb

FUNCTION

rule, duty, requirement; no necessity

EXAMPLE

I have to wear a uniform.
You don’t have to pay.

PRESENT FORMS

I / you / we / they have to
he / she / it has to

REMEMBER

You don’t have to come = it is optional.
You mustn’t come = do not come.

Should and shouldn’t

Advice and recommendations

FORM

subject + should / shouldn’t + base verb

FUNCTION

friendly advice

EXAMPLE

You should see a doctor.
You shouldn’t stay up late.

USE IT WHEN…

- a friend has a problem
- you recommend a place or activity
- you give simple health advice

SPOKEN PROMPT

“I’m always tired.”
Give two pieces of advice.
You should… / You shouldn’t…

May, might and would like

Possibility and polite offers

FORM

may / might + base verb
would like + noun / to + verb

FUNCTION

possible future; polite want / offer

EXAMPLE

It might rain later.
I’d like to book a table.

MAY OR MIGHT?

Both mean “perhaps”.
It may be busy. = It might be busy.

POLITE LANGUAGE

Would you like some coffee?
Yes, please. / No, thank you.
I’d like a sandwich, please.

Will, won’t and shall

Future decisions, promises and suggestions

FORM

will / won’t + base verb
Shall we + base verb?

FUNCTION

future decision or promise; suggestion

EXAMPLE

I’ll call you later.
Shall we take a taxi?

USE WILL WHEN…

- you decide at the moment
- you promise to do something
- you predict a simple future event

QUICK PRACTICE

It’s cold. I ___ close the window.
Answer: I’ll close the window.
___ we meet at 7?
Answer: Shall we meet at 7?

Which one do I choose?

Choose the meaning first

Expression	Main function	Example
can	ability / permission	I can use it.
could	past ability / polite request	Could you wait?
must / have to	obligation / rule	You have to show ID.
mustn’t	prohibition	You mustn’t park here.
should	advice	You should rest.
might / may	possibility	It might snow.
will / shall	future / suggestion	Shall we go?
would like	polite want / offer	I’d like to order.

Spoken practice 1: mini role-plays

Work with a partner. Use at least two target expressions in each situation.

At the gym

Your friend wants to start exercising. Give advice and explain one gym rule.

At a restaurant

Order food politely. Ask about an allergy. Offer your friend a drink.

A rainy weekend

Make plans. Say what you can do and what might happen to the weather.

New job

Ask about rules. Explain what you have to do on your first day.

Spoken practice 2: ask and answer

Ask follow-up questions. Correct your partner if needed.

STUDENT A

- What could you do well when you were a child?
- What rules must people follow in your town?
- What do you have to do this week?
- What should a tourist do in your city?
- What might you do next weekend?

STUDENT B

- Ask one follow-up question after every answer.
- Use: Can you…? / Why? / When? / Who with?
- Give one polite request with could.
- Offer something using Would you like…?

USEFUL REPLIES

I can…
I have to…
I think you should…
I might…

Written practice 1: choose the best answer

Write the complete sentence, not only the missing word.

- 1. You ___ wear a helmet on this ride. (must / might)
- 2. My sister ___ speak French when she was eight. (could / should)
- 3. You look ill. You ___ go home. (should / can’t)
- 4. We ___ bring food. The café sells sandwiches. (don’t have to / mustn’t)
- 5. It ___ be cold tonight, so take a coat. (might / have to)
- 6. ___ you help me with this bag, please? (Could / Must)

Check your answers on the next slide.

Written practice 2: a message to a friend

Write 70–90 words. Use at least five expressions from the list.

TASK

Your friend is visiting your city next month. Write a message to give them useful information.

- say what they can do
- give advice about places to visit
- explain one or two rules
- say what they need to bring
- mention something that might happen

LANGUAGE BANK

can
should
have to
don’t have to
might
I’d like to…
You could…

Try to use a greeting and a closing.

Answers and self-check

Read your sentences aloud after you write them.

WRITTEN PRACTICE 1

1. You must wear a helmet.
2. My sister could speak French.
3. You should go home.
4. We don’t have to bring food.
5. It might be cold tonight.
6. Could you help me?

SELF-CHECK

- Did I use the base verb after the modal?
- Did I use has to with he / she / it?
- Did I use don’t have to for “optional”?
- Did I use mustn’t for “prohibited”?
- Did I include at least five target expressions?