

Functions of Modal Verbs

Expressing ability

- a) Terry is twenty years old. He **can** drive a car. (*present*)
- b) When he was ten, he **could/was able to** ride a bicycle. (*past repeated action*)
- c) Paula **was able to** climb to the top of the mountain. (*managed to do; past single action*)

Expressing lack of ability

- a) Sue **can't** dance. (*present*)
- b) He **couldn't/wasn't able to** play chess when he was younger. (*past repeated action*)
- c) She **couldn't/wasn't able to** finish the book. (*past single action*)

Expressing obligation/duty/necessity

- a) You **must** attend the meeting. (*You are obliged to/You have to/You need to/It is necessary.*)
- b) I **must** attend the meeting. (*I have decided.*)
- c) I **have to** attend the meeting. (*Someone else has decided.*)
- d) We **ought to/should** respect the elderly. (*less strong than must*)
- e) **Need I buy** her a present? (*Is it necessary?*)

Expressing absence of necessity

- a) She **doesn't need to/doesn't have to/needn't** do the shopping. *I'll do it later. (It isn't necessary.)*
- b) She **didn't need to/didn't have to** do the shopping as I had already done it. (*It wasn't necessary for her to do it.*)
- c) She **needn't have done** the shopping. (*It wasn't necessary for her to do the shopping, but she did.*)

Expressing prohibition

You **mustn't/can't** be late for work. (*it's forbidden/you aren't allowed to/it's against the rules/law*)

Expressing certainty

- a) He **must** be at home. (*positive; I'm sure he is.*)
- b) He **can't** be sleeping. (*negative; I'm sure he isn't.*)

Expressing probability

He **ought to/should** be in now. (*He is probably in.*)

Expressing possibility

- a) It **can** get very hot in July. (*it is theoretically possible*)
- b) We **could/may/might** be a little late. (*it is possible*)
- c) He **could/might have been** injured. (*but he wasn't*)

Asking for permission

- a) **Can I** ask you a question, please? (*informal*)
- b) **Could I** ask you a question, please? (*more polite*)
- c) **May/Might I** ask you a question, please? (*formal*)

Giving/Refusing permission

- a) You **can** park your car here. (*informal*)
- b) You **may** park your car in this area. (*formal - usually written*)
- c) You **can't/mustn't** use this phone. (*informal*)
- d) You **may not** use this phone. (*formal - usually written*)

Talking about permission

- a) All students **can/are allowed to** use the library. (*regulation*)
- b) I **could/was allowed to** go out alone when I was 18. (*general permission*)
- c) I **was allowed to** go out alone last night. (*permission for one particular action*)

Making requests

- a) **Can/Will** you explain this to me? (*informal*)
- b) **Could/Would** you explain this to me? (*more polite*)
- c) **Can I** have some water? (*informal*)
- d) **Could/May I** have some water? (*formal*)
- e) **Might I** have some water? (*very formal*)

Making offers

- a) *I'll help you with your essay. (I'm willing to help you.)*
- b) **Shall/Can/Could I** carry this bag for you? (*Would you like me to/Do you want me to do it?*)

Making suggestions

- a) **Shall** we visit Grandma this weekend? } (*Why don't we...?/How about...?/What about...?/Let's ...*)
- b) We **can/could** go to a concert tonight. }
- c) Where **shall** we go? (*What is your suggestion?*)

Giving advice

- a) You **ought to/should** study harder. (*I advise you to*)
- b) You **must** study harder. (*I strongly advise you to.*)

Expressing criticism

- a) You **ought to/should** have been more careful. (*It would have been better if you had been more careful.*)