

MODAL CHART

Meaning	Modal(s)	Present/Future Example(s)	Past tense example
Ability	Can, could	I can take you to the airport.	John couldn't run in the marathon because he sprained his ankle.
	Be able to	Mary is usually able to answer your questions about registering for classes.	I was able to find a parking space.
		We will be able to fix your car when the parts come in. (future)	
Permission	Can	Can I use your calculator?	No past form
	Could (more polite)	Could I use your phone?	No past form
	May (I/we only) (more polite)	May I borrow your car?	No past form
Requests	Will	Will you (please) turn down the radio?	No past form
	Can (informal)	Can I get you a sandwich?	No past form
	Could (more polite)	Could you (please) move your car?	No past form
	Would (more polite)	Would you (please) feed the dog?	No past form
	Might (rare, formal, I/we only) (more polite)	Might I call you back?	No past form
Advice	Should	Mary should eat more vegetables.	I should have called my friend last night, but I didn't.
	Ought to	I ought to go to bed earlier.	I ought to have gone to bed earlier, but I didn't. (uncommon)
	Had better (This is stronger.)	You had better clean your room before your father gets home, or you will be in big trouble.	Tom had better have done his homework, or he's not going to the concert on Saturday. (uncommon)
Suggestions	Could	We could go hiking today.	We could have gone hiking yesterday.
Preferences	Would prefer	I would prefer to pay by check.	Jane would have preferred to pay by credit card, but she had left it at home.
	Would rather	Tom would rather go skiing.	Paul would rather have gone skiing, but he couldn't because he had a terrible cold.
Prohibition	Can not	You cannot park here.	No past form
	Must not (mustn't)	Tommy, you mustn't run out into traffic!	No past form

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Non-necessity	Don't have to	Tom doesn't have to write a letter to his sister because he called her today.	Tom didn't have to write a letter to his sister because he called her yesterday.
Necessity	Must (affirmative only)	I must pay my phone bill.	No past form
	Have to (affirmative only)	I have to pay my phone bill.	I had to pay my phone bill.
	Got to (affirmative only, spoken English)	I have got to pay my phone bill (or my service will be cut off).	No past form
Future possibility	May	I may go to the beach tomorrow.	No past form
	Might	Tom might visit us on Saturday.	No past form
	Could	It could rain tomorrow.	No past form
Certainty (Situation: Present: Why isn't Mary answering her phone? Past: Why wasn't Mary answering her phone?)	May (50%)	She may be in the basement.	She may have been in the basement.
	Might (50%)	She might be taking a shower.	She might have been taking a shower.
	Could (50%, affirmative only)	She could be in the backyard.	She could have been in the backyard.
	Must (95%)	She must be online.	She must have been online.
	Have to/Have got to (95%)	She has to be online.	She had to have been online.
		She has got to be online.	
	Couldn't (99% certainty, negative only)	She couldn't be on vacation!	She couldn't have been on vacation!
	Can't (99% certainty, negative only)	She can't be ignoring the phone.	She can't have been ignoring the phone.
Will (100%) [future only]	She will be available later.	No past form	
Expectation	Be supposed to	We are supposed to be on time every day.	John was supposed to be here at 10:00. Where is he? (Past is unfulfilled expectation.)
	Should (future only) (90% certainty)	Elizabeth should be here by 9:00.	No past form
	Ought to (future only) (90% certainty)	Elizabeth ought to be here by 9:00.	No past form.
Repeated action in the past	Used to	No present or future form	I used to go surfing every day when I lived in Hawaii.
	Would	No present or future form	I would go surfing every day when I lived in Hawaii.
Past situation that no longer exists	Used to	No present or future form	When I was a child, I used to be afraid of dogs. However, I'm not afraid anymore.

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Willingness	Will	<i>I need to get some vegetables from the store. I'll get them.</i>	No past form
Unreal conditions	Would	Mary would go to the Caribbean, but she doesn't have enough money.	Mary would have gone to the Caribbean, but she didn't have enough money.
		Mary would go to the Caribbean if she had enough money.	Mary would have gone to the Caribbean if she had had enough money.
	Could	If Mary could go, she would.	If Mary could have gone, she would have.
		If Mary had enough money, she could go to the Caribbean.	If Mary had had enough money, she could have gone to the Caribbean.

Written by the tutors and staff of the English Language Resource Center at Bergen Community College, NJ