

11 Modals and related verbs 1

A Modal verbs: form

In the early stages of the Internet revolution, Midland Bank found it **could do** things with its online subsidiary First Direct that the computer systems of its mainstream bank were not able to do.

(ft.com website)

- Units 11–14 deal with modal verbs. Modal verbs are *can, could, will, would, may, might, shall, should* and *must*.
 - Modal verbs are followed by the infinitive without *to*.
 - Modal verbs have only one form. So there is no *-s* in the third person singular and there are no verb tenses with *-ing, -ed*, etc.
 - Questions are made by putting the modal in front of the subject. Negatives are made by putting *not* immediately after the modal (often shortened to *-n't* in spoken English and informal written English).
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|--------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Can I ...? | I cannot (can't) | May I ...? | I may not |
| Could I ...? | I could not (couldn't) | Might I ...? | I might not |
| Will I ...? | I will not (won't) | Shall I ...? | I shall not (shan't) |
| Would I ...? | I would not (wouldn't) | Should I ...? | I should not (shouldn't) |
| Must I ...? | I must not (mustn't) | | |

- Modal verbs are auxiliary verbs – they are used with other main verbs. Two modal verbs cannot be put together.
- Modal verbs have no infinitive form. Instead, we use other expressions like *be able to* (for *can*), *have to* (for *must*) and *be likely to* (for *might*).
I'd like to be able to speak better French. (NOT ~~*I'd like to can speak*~~)
- Modal verbs show the speaker's attitude or feelings about a situation. For example, how probable or necessary something is, or that the speaker is offering or requesting something.
- The same modal verb can be used in different ways and with different meanings. You only know the meaning from the situation. For example, *could*:

I could get to work in 30 minutes in my last job. (ability: past time)

Could you pass the salt, please? (request: present time)

That **could** be difficult. (uncertainty: future time)

B Ability

- To talk about ability we use *can* and *can't* (or *cannot* in formal writing).
We can get that information from the Net.
Can you deliver in two weeks? – No, we **can't**.
'If we cannot produce an image that both captures the essence of the Hungarian nation and is convincing, then others will produce it instead' said Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in his speech yesterday. (Central Europe Review website)

See also unit 12

- *Can't* is used for all things that we are not able to do.
I can't speak German.

For the special case of things that are prohibited (not allowed) by rules or laws we can also use **mustn't**.

I'm sorry, you can't/mustn't smoke in this area.

- We sometimes use *be able/unable to* instead of *can*. They are common in writing.
For the first time in years we are now able to generate growth internally, not just through acquisitions. (International Herald Tribune website)