

Modal verbs

function	time	form	example
ability	present	can	<i>She can speak Spanish but she can't speak Italian.</i>
	past	could	<i>Despite his handicap, he is able to drive a car. Mozart could play the piano at the age of five.</i>
possibility	past	was/were able to	<i>Mike's car broke down but he was able to repair it.</i>
	present	may, might, could	<i>There may be life on Mars. The rash could be a symptom of something more serious.</i>
	future	could have, might have, will be able to	<i>She might have done it; she had the opportunity and the motive. We'll be able to travel to the moon but we won't be able to travel to Mars.</i>
arrangements	future	can, could, be able to	<i>The doctor could see you at six; he can't see you before then as he's too busy.</i>
permission	present/future	can, can't	<i>'Can I use your phone?' 'No, I'm afraid you can't.'</i>
	past	allowed to	<i>I was allowed to leave early yesterday.</i>
obligation	present	have (got) to, must, need (to), should	<i>Students have (got) to wear school uniform here. I must get up earlier. Do we need to get a visa for the USA? You should respect your neighbours.</i>
	past	had to	<i>We had to report to reception by four.</i>
	future	will have to, will, need to	<i>We'll have to/ll need to get our visas sorted out.</i>
necessity	present	must, have to, need to	<i>All human beings must/have to/need to have enough sleep.</i>
	past	had to, needed to	<i>Cave dwellers had to/needed to hunt in order to survive.</i>
	future	will have to, will need to	<i>You'll have to/ll need to work harder than that.</i>
prohibition	present/future	must not, cannot, may not, should not	<i>You mustn't touch that kettle! Guests can't/may not use the pool after 11 p.m.</i>
	past	could not	<i>You shouldn't speak to me like that! We couldn't go because we were too young.</i>
past criticism		should (not) have	<i>You shouldn't have driven through that red light.</i>

absence of obligation or necessity	present	do not have to, do not need to	<i>You don't have to/don't need to pay to visit most museums in Britain.</i>
	past	did not have to, did not need to, need not have	<i>You didn't have to/didn't need to finish the job. We needn't have taken sweaters as it was so warm there.</i>
advice/recommendation	future	will not have to, will not need to	<i>You won't have to/won't need to ask the doctor to sign this form.</i>
	present/future	must, should, had better	<i>You really must read 'Birdsong'! You should consider a private pension. You'd better change the locks straight away.</i>
logical deduction	present/future	must, have to, cannot	<i>This must/has to be the place. This amount can't be correct.</i>
	past	must have, cannot have	<i>That noise must have been an explosion. She can't have done it - she wasn't even here.</i>
probability	present/future	should	<i>The plane should be landing now.</i>
certainty	past	should have	<i>What's happened to the boys? They should have arrived hours ago.</i>
	present	will	<i>It won't be warm at this time of year. They'll have received the invitations by now.</i>
routines	present	will	<i>He'll come in and he'll start giving instructions.</i>
habits	past	would	<i>He'd come in and he'd start giving instructions.</i>
	present	will	<i>The public will always side with the nurses. Dad would always tell me how to run my life.</i>
characteristics	past	would	<i>The stadium will hold about 110,000 people. The car wouldn't start on cold mornings.</i>
	present	will	<i>The stadium will hold about 110,000 people. The car wouldn't start on cold mornings.</i>
willingness/refusal	present	will, won't	<i>The doctor will act as a witness.</i>
	past	would, wouldn't	<i>The shop wouldn't change this jumper.</i>
other functions	present/future	will, shall	<i>I'll wash up this evening. Shall I wash up this evening?</i>
	future	shall, will, would, will, shall	<i>Shall we go out for a curry? Will you give me a call? Would you fill in this form, please? You will/shall all stay after school tonight.</i>
	past	would	<i>It would be nice to live by the sea. It would have been a good idea to notify us in advance.</i>
hypothetical desires	present/future	would	<i>It would have been a good idea to notify us in advance.</i>