

Basic English Grammar



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Modal Verbs

Week 5 – Lecture 5

Modal verbs are very common in English. They are used to talk about a variety of things, particularly possibilities, obligations, and deductions.

Can

We use **can** to say that something is possible or allowed, or that somebody has the ability to do something. We use **can** + *base form* (can do/can see, etc.):

- We **can see** the ocean from our hotel window.
- I don't have a pen "You **can use** mine,"
- **Can** you **speak** any foreign languages?
- I **can come** and help you tomorrow if you want.
- The word "dream" **can be** a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't** (cannot):

- I'm afraid I **can't come** to your party on Friday.

Can and (be) able to

You can say that somebody **is/are able to** do something, but **can** is more common:

- We **are able to** see the ocean from our hotel window.

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (*present*) and **could** (*past*). So sometimes it is necessary to use **(be) able to**. Compare:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I can't sleep.• Tom can come tomorrow.• Maria can speak French, Spanish, and English. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I haven't been able to sleep recently.• Tom might be able to come tomorrow.• Applicants for the job must be able to speak two foreign languages. |
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Could

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:

see

hear

smell

taste

feel

remember

understand

- We had a nice room in the hotel. We **could see** the ocean.
- As soon as I walked into the room, I **could smell** gas.
- She spoke in a very soft voice, so I **couldn't understand** what she said.

We also use **could** to say that somebody had the general ability or permission to do something:

- My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- We were totally free. We **could do** what we wanted.

Could and was able to

We use **could** for general ability. But if you want to say that somebody did something in a specific situation, use **was/were able to** or **managed to**:

- The fire spread through the building very quickly, but fortunately everybody **was able to escape/managed to escape**.
- We didn't know where David was, but we **managed to find/were able to find** him in the end.

Compare:

- Jack was an excellent tennis player when he was younger. He **could beat** anybody. (= he had the general ability to beat anybody)
- Jack and Ted played tennis yesterday. Ted played very well, but Jack **managed to / was able to beat** him. (= he managed to beat him this time)

The negative **couldn't (could not)** is possible in all situations:

- My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- We looked for David everywhere, but we **couldn't find** him.
- Ted played well, but he **couldn't beat** Jack.

Could

We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions which are not realistic. For example:

- I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week.

Compare **can** and **could**:

- I **can** stay with Nina when I go to New York. (*realistic*)
- Maybe, I **could stay** with Nina when I go to New York. (*possible, but less sure*)
- This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here forever. (*unrealistic*)

We use **could have** (+ verb 3) to talk about the past. Compare:

- I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (now)
- I **was** so tired, I **could have slept** for a week. (past)
- The situation is bad, but it **could be** worse. (now)
- The situation **was** bad, but it **could have been** worse. (past)

Something **could have** happened = it was possible but did not happen:

- Why did you stay at a hotel when you were in New York? You **could have stayed** with Nina.
- I didn't know that you wanted to go to the concert. I **could have gotten** you a free ticket.
- Dave was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's okay.

We use **couldn't** to say that something would not be possible now:

- I **couldn't live** in a big city.
- Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't be** better.

For the past, we use **couldn't have**:

- We had a really good vacation. It **couldn't have been** better.
- The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have gone** anyway because he was sick.

May & Might

- You are looking for Ben. Nobody is sure where he is, but you get some suggestions.

Where's Ben?



He **may** be in his office.

He **might** be having lunch.

Ask Ann. She **might** know.

We use **may** or **might** to say that something is a possibility.
Usually, you can use **may** or **might**, so you can say:

- It may be true. *or* It might be true.
- She might know. *or* She may know.

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not**:

- It may not be true.
- She might not work here anymore.

Study the structure:

I/you/he (etc.)	may might	(not)	be (true/in his office, etc.) be (doing/working/having, etc.) do/know/work/want, etc.
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May & Might

We use **may** and **might** to talk about possible actions or happenings in the future:

- I haven't decided yet where to go on vacation. I **may go** to Hawaii.
- Take an umbrella with you. It **might rain** later.
- The bus isn't always on time. We **might have** to wait a few minutes.

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not**.

- Joy **may not go** out tonight. She isn't feeling well.
- There **might not be** enough time to discuss everything at the meeting.

Compare will and may/might:

- I **will be** late this evening. (for sure)
- I **may/might be** late this evening. (possible)

Usually you can use **may** or **might** interchangeably.

- I **may go** to Japan. *or* I **might go** to Japan.
- Lisa **might be** able to help you. *or* Lisa **may be** able to help you.

But we use only **might** when the situation is not real:

- If I were in Tom's position, I think I **might look** for another job.

(may is not possible in this example).

For the past we use **may have done** or **might have done**:

- A: I wonder why Kate didn't answer the phone.
B: She **may have been** asleep.
- A: I can't find my bag anywhere.
B: You **might have left** it in the store.
- A: I was surprised that Sarah wasn't at the meeting yesterday.
B: She **might not have known** about it.
- A: I wonder why David was in such a bad mood yesterday.
B: He **may not have been** feeling well.

I/you/he (etc.)	may might	(not) have	been (true/in his office, etc.) been (doing/working/having, etc.) known/done/worked/wanted, etc.
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There is also a continuous form: **may/might be -ing**.

Compare this with **will be -ing**:

- Don't call me at 8:30. **I'll be watching** the baseball game on TV.
- Don't call me at 8:30. **I might be watching** (or I may be watching) the baseball game on TV.

We also use **may/might be -ing** for possible plans. Compare:

- I'm going to Hawaii in July. (for sure)
- I may be going (or I might be going) to Hawaii in July. (possible)

Should

You **should do** something = it is a good thing to do or the right thing to do.

You can use **should** to give advice or to give an opinion:

- You look tired. You **should go** to bed.
- The government **should do** more to reduce crime.
- “**Should** we **invite** Susan to the party?” “Yes, I think we should.”

We often use **should** with **I think/I don't think/Do you think?:**

- **I think** the government **should do** more to reduce crime.
- **I don't think** you **should work** so hard.
- “**Do you think** I **should apply** for this job?” “Yes, I think you should.”

You **shouldn't do** something = it isn't a good thing to do:

- You **shouldn't believe** everything you read in the newspapers.

Should is not as strong as **must** or **have to**:

- You **should** apologize. (= it would be a good thing to do)
- You **must** apologize. / You **have to** apologize. (= you have no alternative)

We also use **should** when something is not right or not what we expect:

- ✓ I wonder where Liz is. She **should be** here by now.
(= she isn't here yet, and this is not normal)
- ✓ The price on this package is wrong. It **should be** Rp. 29.000, not Rp. 59.000.
- ✓ That man on the motorcycle **should be wearing** a helmet.

We also use **should** to say that we expect something to happen:

- ✓ She's been studying hard for the exam, so she **should pass**.
(= I expect her to pass)
- ✓ There are plenty of hotels in this city. It **shouldn't be** hard to find a place to stay. (= I don't expect it to be hard)

You **should have done** something = you didn't do it, but it would have been the right thing to do:

- ❖ You missed a great party last night. You **should have come**. Why didn't you?
(= you didn't come, but it would have been good to come)
- ❖ I wonder why they're so late. They **should have been** here an hour ago.

You **shouldn't have done** something = you did it, but it was the wrong thing to do:

I feel sick. I **shouldn't have eaten** so much. (= I ate too much)

She **shouldn't have been listening** to our conversation. It was private.

Compare **should** (do) and **should have** (done):

You look tired. You **should go** to bed now.

You went to bed very late last night. You **should have gone** to bed earlier.

Would

We use would ('d) / wouldn't when we imagine a situation or action (= we think of something that is not real):

- It **would be** nice to buy a new car, but we can't afford it.
- I'd **love** to live by the ocean.
- A: Should I tell Chris what happened?
B: No, I **wouldn't say** anything.
(= I wouldn't say anything in your situation)

We use **would have (done)** when we imagine situations or actions in the past (= things that didn't happen):

- They helped us a lot. I don't know what we **would have done** without their help.
- I didn't tell Sam what happened. He **wouldn't have been** pleased.

Compare **would (do)** and **would have (done)**:

- I **would call** Sisca, but I don't have her number. (now)
I **would have called** Sisca, but I didn't have her number. (past)
- I'm not going to invite them to the party. They **wouldn't come** anyway.
I didn't invite them to the party. They **wouldn't have come** anyway.

Compare will ('ll) and would ('d):

- **I'll stay** a little longer, I've got plenty of time.
I'd stay a little longer, but I really have to go now.
(so I can't stay longer)
- **I'll call** Susca. I've got her number.
I'd call Susca, but I don't have her number.
(so I can't call her)

Sometimes **would/wouldn't** is the past of **will/won't**.

Present	Past
Tom: I'll call you on Sunday.	Tom said he'd call me on Sunday.
Ann: I promise I won't be late.	Ann promised that she wouldn't be late.
Liz: Darn! The car won't start	Liz was annoyed because her car wouldn't start.

Must

We use **must** to say that we feel sure something is true:

- You've been traveling all day. You **must be** tired.
- "Jim is a hard worker." "Jim? You **must be** joking. He's very lazy."
- I'm sure Sally gave me her phone number. I **must have** it somewhere.

We use **must not** to say that we feel sure something is not true:

- Their car isn't outside their house. They **must not be** home.
- Brian said he would be here by 9:30. It's 10:00 now, and he's never late. He **must not be** coming.
- They haven't lived here very long. They **must not know** many people.

For the past, we use **must (not) have done**:

- “We used to live close to the freeway.” “Did you? It **must have been** noisy.”
- There’s nobody at home. They **must have gone** out.
- I’ve lost one of my gloves. I **must have dropped** it somewhere.
- She walked past me without speaking. She **must not have seen** me.

Slide Title

Study the structure:

Must

I/you/he (etc.)	must (not)	be (tired/hungry/home, etc.) be (doing/coming/joking, etc.) do/get/know/have, etc.
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Must have

I/you/he (etc.)	must (not)	have	been (tired/hungry/noisy, etc.) been (doing/coming/looking, etc.) gone/dropped/seen, etc.
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Thank you!

REFERENCES

Murphy, Raymond & Smalzer, William. *Grammar in use, Intermediate*. Cambridge U. Press, 2019.

DK. *English for Everyone – English Grammar Guide*. Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2016.

PICTURE SOURCES ON EACH SLIDE

- Slide 12: [Grammar in use - Intermediate Book, page 56.](#)