

Communicative English Language Skills II

Lecture 10

Grammar Focus: Modal Verbs

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Welcome to Lecture 10

Today is dedicated entirely to modal verbs — **one of the richest and most communicatively powerful areas of English grammar.**

- Modal verbs appear constantly in academic writing, conversation, and formal correspondence.
- Today's grammar lesson is embedded in Unit III: Environmental Protection.
- You will leave with a working understanding of modals across three domains: obligation, possibility, advice.

"You have been using these words your whole life. Today is your chance to understand the rules behind them."

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Identify and name the principal modal verbs in English.
- Explain the four key structural rules governing modal verbs.
- Use modal verbs to express obligation, possibility, and advice.
- Distinguish modals with similar meanings (must vs. have to; may vs. might).
- Apply modal perfect forms (must have, could have, may have) to past events.
- Use modal verbs in speaking and writing about real-world topics.

Why Modal Verbs Matter

- Modal verbs let us express attitude, not just action — certainty, duty, advice, permission.
- Compare: "I go" vs "I must go" vs "I might go" vs "I should go" — same action, very different message.
- Mastering modals is the single fastest way to sound natural, precise and academic in English.
- Environmental discourse — our unit theme — relies heavily on modals (might, must, should, will).

Theme of the Unit · Environmental Protection

Modals are everywhere in environmental writing:

Scientists WARN

might, may, could

"The climate might get worse."

Governments RULE

must, must not, have to

"Factories must reduce emissions."

Experts ADVISE

should, ought to, would

"Communities should recycle waste."

Key Vocabulary · A Quick Orientation

Modal verb

An auxiliary verb expressing the "mode" of an action — ability, possibility, obligation, advice, permission.

Obligation

A duty or requirement — something that must be done.

Possibility

The chance or likelihood that something is or could be true.

Advice

A recommendation or suggestion about what someone should do.

Permission

Allowing someone to do something.

Prohibition

Preventing or forbidding something.

Modal perfect

modal + have + past participle — expresses past probability or deduction.

Warm-Up Activity · What Would You Say?

Pair / Small Group Speaking · 5 minutes

There is no single correct answer — use any words that feel natural to you.

- Situation 1: A friend wants to swim in a river with a strong current. What do you tell them?
- Situation 2: You're unsure if it will rain this afternoon. How do you say this?
- Situation 3: Your university requires all students to wear an ID card. Explain this rule to a new student.
- Situation 4: A classmate asks if they can borrow your notes. What do you say?

Pre-Reading Questions · Activity 3.1

Group Discussion · 5 minutes

- What environmental challenges currently face the world?
- Which of these challenges do you think is the most serious? Why?
- What do you think governments and communities must do to address them?
- Are there environmental challenges in your own community or region of Ethiopia?
- What do you think individuals should do to help protect the environment?

Identifying Modal Verbs in Context

As you read the passage, underline or circle every modal verb you find.

Look for:

can

could

may

might

must

shall

should

will

would

ought to

After reading, count how many you found and note what each one expresses.

Reading · Easter Island

A POWERFUL ENVIRONMENTAL LESSON

Easter Island, 3,000 km off the coast of Chile, was once home to a thriving population.

The population grew too quickly, exhausted the island's resources, and the civilisation collapsed.

Giant statues remain — but no one knows exactly how they were carved, moved, or why the civilisation ended.

WHY THIS STORY?

- Listen for natural use of must have, might have, could have.
- It is the basis for our modal-perfect gap-fill (Activity 3.10).
- Modals are doing real, urgent communicative work here.

Easter Island · Comprehension

Discuss with a partner · 6 minutes

- What was observed about Easter Island's original inhabitants?
- Why did the population increase, and what happened as a result?
- What are the famous statues, and what mysteries surround them?
- What lessons can we draw from Easter Island for our own environmental future?

Notice: as we discuss what happened, we naturally use "must have", "might have", "could have" — exactly what we will study next.

PART 1

Grammar Core

What modal verbs are, and the four rules that govern them.

What Is a Modal Verb?

Modal verbs are helping verbs that express the MODE or MANNER of the action — ability, possibility, probability, permission, obligation.

"Go" simply describes an action.

- I must go. → obligation
- I might go. → possibility
- I should go. → advice

Same action — three very different messages. The modal carries the speaker's attitude.

The Complete List of English Modals

shall

should

will

would

can

could

may

might

must

ought to

used to

need

dare

Don't worry — you already use most of these words every day.

The goal is confidence, not memorisation.

Modals by Function Pair

can / could

Ability, permission, possibility, requests

may / might

Possibility, permission, wishes

will / would

Future, certainty, habits, polite requests

shall / should

Future (formal), advice, obligation

must / have to

Strong obligation, necessity, prohibition

ought to

Advice, moral obligation

Rule 1 · No Inflection for Person or Number

A modal verb does NOT change with the number or person of the subject.

Compare:

Ordinary verb

I run · He runs · She runs

Modal verb

I can learn.

You can learn.

He / She can learn.

They / We can learn.

Common error: She musts go. → She must go.

Rule 2 · Always Followed by the Base Verb

Modal + base form (no "to", no -s, no -ed, no -ing).

Correct

I can run.

I may run.

I could run.

I might run.

Incorrect

~~She must to go.~~

~~He should studied.~~

~~They might going.~~

~~We could helped.~~

The modal carries the tense — the main verb stays simple.

Rule 2 · Two Special Exceptions

Two modals conventionally carry "to":

ought to

used to

Examples

- You ought to apologise.
- I ought to study harder for the exam.
- She used to live in Addis Ababa.
- We used to walk to school every day.

Rule 3 · Modals Can Stand Alone

In short answers, the main verb is understood from context and dropped.

Q: Can you sing?

A: I can.

Q: Will you come?

A: I will. / I may.

Q: Should we start now?

A: We should.

Q: May I sit here?

A: You may.

This is one of the simplest ways to make your speech sound natural and fluent.

Rule 4 · Negatives & Contractions

Modals form negatives by adding "not". Most have contracted forms used in speech.

cannot → **can't**

could not → **couldn't**

will not → **won't**

would not → **wouldn't**

should not → **shouldn't**

must not → **mustn't**

might not → **mightn't**

may not **(no contraction)**

Watch out: "cannot" is one word; "won't" is irregular.

Common Errors · Quick Diagnostic

Incorrect

X She must to submit her assignment.

X He should studied more.

X They might going to the market.

X We could helped them.

X She musts go now.

Correct

✓ She must submit her assignment.

✓ He should study more.

✓ They might go to the market.

✓ We could help them.

✓ She must go now.

PART 2

Functions · Obligation

must · must not · have to · don't have to

Must · Strong Internal Obligation

Use must when the speaker feels the obligation strongly — duty, urgency, personal conviction.

- You must wear your ID card on campus.
- We must protect our forests for the next generation.
- I must finish this report tonight.
- Citizens must vote to make democracy work.

Reminder: must has no past form. For past obligation, use had to.

Have to · External Obligation

Use have to when the obligation comes from outside — a rule, a schedule, an institution.

Tense flexibility:

- Present: I have to submit my project tomorrow.
- Past: She had to leave early because of the bus.
- Future: They will have to revise plans after the flood.

Quick drill: "At this university, students have to ____."

Must vs. Have to · Spot the Difference

MUST

- Internal feeling of duty.
- Speaker imposes the obligation.
- No past form (use had to).
- I must call my mother today.
- We must act on climate change.

HAVE TO

- External rule or requirement.
- Imposed by others or circumstances.
- Has all tense forms (have / had / will have to).
- I have to submit the form by Friday.
- She had to wear a uniform at school.

Must Not · Prohibition

mustn't = FORBIDDEN / NOT ALLOWED (not "not necessary")

- You must not talk loudly in the library.
- You must not smoke in public buildings.
- Students must not use mobile phones during examinations.
- Factories must not discharge waste into rivers.
- Drivers must not exceed the speed limit in school zones.

Mustn't vs. Don't Have to · Most Confused

MUSTN'T · PROHIBITED

"You mustn't swim here."

The pool gate is locked. No entry.

- Dangerous and not permitted.
- Strict rule — penalty if broken.
- It is forbidden to do this.

DON'T HAVE TO · OPTIONAL

"You don't have to swim."

The pool gate is open. You choose.

- Allowed but not necessary.
- No requirement — your decision.
- Absence of obligation.

Common trap: mustn't ≠ don't have to.

Pair Drill · must / mustn't / have to / don't have to

Pair Work · 6 minutes · Complete each blank with the best option.

1. Students _____ submit their assignments by Friday. (required)
2. You _____ enter the examination hall after it has started. (forbidden)
3. You _____ bring a dictionary — one is provided for you. (not necessary)
4. Passengers _____ fasten their seatbelts during takeoff. (required by law)
5. Visitors _____ leave rubbish in the national park. (not permitted)
6. She _____ travel by bus — she has her own car. (not necessary)
7. Factories _____ reduce their carbon emissions. (global obligation)

Key: 1 must/have to · 2 must not · 3 don't have to · 4 must/have to · 5 must not · 6 doesn't have to · 7 must

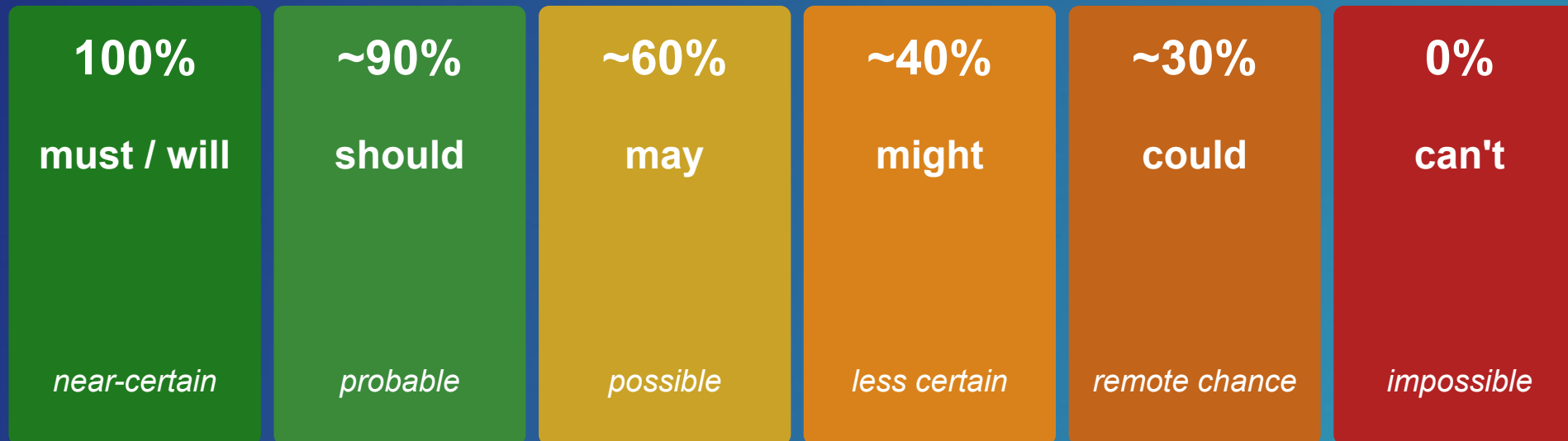
PART 3

Functions · Possibility

How sure am I? · may · might · could · must · can't

The Certainty Spectrum

English modals show degrees of certainty — choose the right one to be precise.



*She must be at the office. · The results should be ready. · It may rain.
· It might snow. · Things could improve. She can't be home.*

May · Might · Could

MAY

genuine possibility

She may be available Friday.
The floods may get worse.
Climate change may affect food production.

MIGHT

low probability

The climate might get worse.
She might be late — there is heavy traffic.
Scientists say the island might have been bigger.

COULD

remote / tentative

They could go out to dinner again.
With better policy, the region could become sustainable. The statues could have been built over generations.

Must · Logical Certainty (Deduction)

Use must when you are almost sure based on evidence.

Evidence → Conclusion → must

- Zerega calls but she doesn't pick up — she must be working.
- There's smoke coming from the building — it must be on fire.
- She has been studying for 12 hours — she must be exhausted.
- The lights are on — they must be home.

Can't · Logical Impossibility

Can't is the opposite of must for deduction — impossible based on evidence.

- She can't be at home — I just saw her at the market.
- That can't be right — the figures don't add up.
- They can't have eaten all the food already — we just bought it!
- He can't be the thief — he was with me.

Pair Task · Make your own pairs: "She MUST be ____." / "She CAN'T be ____."

Modal Perfects · Talking About the Past

FORM: modal + have + past participle

must have + pp

high certainty

The inhabitants must have used up all the food.

may have + pp

possible

They may have discovered the island by accident.

might / could have + pp

low / remote possibility

The statues could have been built over generations.

should have + pp

past advice / regret

We should have acted on climate change earlier.

can't have + pp

impossibility

It can't have been easy to move them.

Activity 3.10 · Easter Island Gap-Fill

Individual / Pair · 7 minutes · Use the word bank to complete the passage.

WORD BANK

may have landed

may have discovered the island

must have used up all the food

might have been gods

could have been part

can't have been easy

must not have landed

might have done this

should have done this

Easter Island, 3,000 km off Chile, is very far from land. Scientists believe the original inhabitants _____ by accident. Around 100 people _____ on the western coast. The inhabitants _____ on the island and finally all died. The statues _____, or Easter Island _____ of a much bigger island. The statues are very large and heavy, so they _____ to move.

Activity · Flooding Text in Context

Individual · 6 minutes · Fill the gaps with the right modal phrase.

"As a result of the flooding, as many as 10,000 families (1)_____ homeless. The emergency services are working hard, but I'm sure they (2)_____ more than 20 helicopters. It (3)_____ days to reach everyone. Conditions for those still waiting (4)_____ very difficult. There (5)_____ any clean water and everyone (6)_____ very cold. More rain is forecast, so the floods (7)_____ worse. The emergency services (8)_____ time to reach everyone before the waters rise again."

WORD BANK

1 must be · 2 can't have · 3 could take · 4 might be · 5 may not have ·
6 must be · 7 may get · 8 can't have

PART 4

Advice, Permission, Requests, Promises, Wishes

The social side of modal verbs.

Should · Ought To · Giving Advice

SHOULD

- **Most common modal for advice and recommendations.**
- You should wear a helmet on a motorbike.
- Students should review notes within 24 hours.
- Governments should invest in renewable energy.

OUGHT TO

- **Stronger sense of moral / proper behaviour.**
- You ought to see a doctor about that cough.
- Factories ought to reduce their emissions.
- Students ought to respect their teachers.

Asking Permission · may · can · could

MAY

Most formal

May I come in?

Official settings; speaking to authority.

CAN

Neutral / informal

Can I borrow your notes?

Everyday speech with peers.

COULD

Polite

Could I use your pen, please?

Soft and respectful — works in most contexts.

Polite Requests · can · could · would

Can you help me?

Informal / direct

Could you help me, please?

More polite

Would you please send me the document?

Formal / very polite

Would you mind opening the window?

Very polite / indirect

Promises · Wishes

PROMISES · will / shall

- I will mail you my address.
- I will be there at 8 — I promise.
- We shall provide all necessary support.
- I will help you prepare for the exam.

WISHES · may

- May you have a long life!
- May you succeed in all your endeavours.
- May the rains end the drought this season.
 - May this generation protect our environment.

A formal, hopeful, sometimes literary use of may.

Activity: Write one promise: "By the end of this semester, I will ____."

Activity 3.8 · Matching Functions in Context

Individual / Pair · 8 minutes · Match each modal-verb sentence to its function.

advice, suggestion, certainty, capacity, rational probability, possibility, polite request, low probability, permission, obligation

1. Zerega should call Almaz soon after the date.
2. Almaz should be happy to get his call.
3. She doesn't pick up — she must be working.
4. No problem, he can call her back later.
5. They could go out to dinner again.
6. She says she may be available Friday.
7. Can he call her back Friday morning?
8. She could be in a meeting — afternoon is better.
9. May I pick you up at 6 pm?
10. He must be on time to make a good impression.

Reference Table · Modal Verb Functions

Modal	Function	Example	Note
must	Strong obligation	You must wear your ID.	No -s; past = had to
must not	Prohibition	You must not talk in the library.	Forbidden, not optional
have to	External obligation	I have to submit by Friday.	All tense forms
don't have to	No obligation	You don't have to attend.	Optional
should / ought to	Advice	You should study regularly.	Softer than must
can	Ability / informal permission	Can I borrow your pen?	Everyday register
could	Polite request / past ability / possibility	Could you help me? / It could rain.	Versatile
may	Possibility / formal permission / wish	It may rain. / May I come in?	Formal
might	Low probability	It might snow tomorrow.	Less certain than may
will / shall	Future / promise / certainty	I will call you.	Most common future
would	Polite request / conditional	Would you help me?	Conditional uses
must / can't	Logical certainty / impossibility	She must be working. / She can't be home.	Deduction
modal + have + pp	Past deduction	He must have left.	Past events only

Quick Review · Four Structural Rules

1

Modals do NOT add -s, -ed, or -ing.

She must · not She musts

2

Modals are ALWAYS followed by the base form.

She should go · not She should going

3

Modals can stand ALONE in short responses.

Will you come? — I will.

4

Modals form negatives with NOT — many contract.

cannot / can't · will not / won't

Self-Assessment Checklist

Tick (✓) what you can do confidently. Circle items you want to revisit.

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I can name at least eight English modal verbs. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use modal perfects (must have, might have, could have). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I can explain the four key structural rules. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use should and ought to to give advice. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use must and have to correctly for obligation. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use will and might to make predictions. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I understand the difference between must not and don't have to. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I can identify modals in a text and explain their function. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use may, might and could for degrees of possibility. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I can write a paragraph using at least four different modals correctly. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I can use must and can't for logical deduction. | | |

Speaking 3.13 · Debating the Future

Partner Debate · 10 minutes · Use modals to argue for or against each statement.

- Nuclear energy will end.
- Almost all the rainforests will disappear.
- The climate will get worse.
- The next generation will care more about the environment than the present one.
- People will destroy the earth.

Try: must · should · might · could · will · won't — and support your point with evidence.

Speaking 3.14 · Environmental Problems

Group Discussion · 12 minutes · Discuss causes and propose solutions using modals.

Ozone Depletion

Greenhouse Effect & Global Warming

Desertification

Deforestation

Loss of Biodiversity

Disposal of Wastes

Acid Rain

Overfishing

Urban Sprawl

Water Pollution

Population Growth

Waste Production

Frame your solutions with: governments must · communities should · individuals could · if we don't act, we might...

Writing Activity · Modals for the Environment

Individual Writing · 8 minutes · Write one sentence per modal on the theme of environmental protection.

must

must not

should

ought to

may

might

could

can't

will

would

Wrap-Up · What You Take Away Today

- Modal verbs add the speaker's attitude — certainty, duty, advice, permission.
- Four rules: no inflection, base verb follows, can stand alone, contract with not.
- Obligation: must (internal) vs have to (external); mustn't ≠ don't have to.
- Possibility scale: must / will → should → may → might → could → can't.
- Modal perfects (must have, could have...) talk about the past.
- Use them in your speaking and writing on the environment — and in everyday life.

"By the end of this semester, I will ____."* · *Make your own promise tonight.

Thank You

Questions, ideas, and reflections are warmly welcomed.

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