CELTESTPIP

Modal Verbs Chart and Exercises

Can, could, may, might, must, should, will and would: meanings, strength, past forms and 18 practice questions with answers

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Free to download and print. The online version is at celtestpip.com/learn/modal-verbs-in-english

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Three rules every modal follows

1. **No “to” after a modal.** “I can swim”, not “I can to swim”. The one exception is ought to.
2. **No -s for he, she or it.** “She can drive”, not “She cans drive”.
3. **No “do” in questions and negatives.** “Can you come?” and “I can’t come”, not “Do you can come?”

The modal verbs chart

Modal	Main jobs	Example
can	ability, permission, possibility	I can drive a truck. You can park here after 6.
could	past ability, polite request, possibility	Could you send me the form? It could snow tonight.
may	formal permission, possibility	May I ask a question? The clinic may close early.
might	weaker possibility, gentle suggestion	I might be late. You might want to call first.
must	strong obligation, confident conclusion	Visitors must sign in. She must be tired after that shift.
shall	offers and suggestions with I or we	Shall I bring anything? Shall we start?
should	advice, what you expect to happen	You should book early. The parcel should arrive Friday.
will	future, promises, offers	I will call you tomorrow. I’ll carry that for you.
would	polite requests, imagined situations	Would you mind waiting a minute? If I were you, I would take the earlier bus.
ought to	advice, a little more formal than should	You ought to check the expiry date.

Semi-modals do a modal’s job but change form: have to, need to, be able to, had better. Use them when a modal cannot: “I will be able to help”, “We had to leave”.

How strong is each modal?

How strong	Modal	Example	When it fits
Very soft	might want to, could	You could try the library on Sundays.	Ideas for a friend, nothing at stake
Soft	should, ought to	You should ask for a receipt.	Normal advice
Firm	had better	You'd better leave now or you'll miss the train.	A warning: something bad happens if you don't
Very firm	must, have to	You must wear a helmet on the site.	Rules, laws, real necessity

Everyday advice belongs at the soft end. "You should speak to your manager" helps. "You must speak to your manager" can sound like an order.

Polite requests, from casual to very polite

1. "Can you send me the file?" Fine with a friend or close coworker.
2. "Could you send me the file?" Polite, safe almost everywhere.
3. "Would you mind sending me the file?" More polite. Note the -ing after "mind".
4. "I was wondering if you could send me the file." Very polite, for a real favour.

Hear your own tone: record a Speaking Task 1 answer, free with an account, with AI feedback on your recording.

Past modals

Past modal	What it means	Example
should have + past participle	It was the right thing, but it didn't happen	I should have left earlier.
shouldn't have + past participle	It happened, but it was a mistake	You shouldn't have paid in cash.
could have + past participle	It was possible, but it didn't happen	You could have asked me for a ride.
must have + past participle	A confident guess about the past	He must have missed the bus.
might have / may have + past participle	A less certain guess about the past	She might have forgotten the meeting.

In writing, use "could have" or "could've", never "could of".

Mustn't or don't have to?

Phrase	Meaning	Example
mustn't	It is not allowed	You mustn't park here. You'll get a ticket.
don't have to	It is not necessary	You don't have to park here. There's another lot.

Common mistakes

Mistake	Correct	Why
I must to finish this today.	I must finish this today.	No “to” after a modal (except ought to).
She cans speak French.	She can speak French.	Modals never take -s.
Do you can help me?	Can you help me?	Modals make questions on their own.
I will can help you next week.	I will be able to help you next week.	Two modals cannot sit together.
You mustn’t bring food. There will be plenty.	You don’t have to bring food. There will be plenty.	Mustn’t means not allowed. Don’t have to means not necessary.
I could of called you.	I could have called you.	“Could of” is a mishearing of could’ve.

Modal verbs on the CELPIP test

CELPIP rates Speaking and Writing in four areas each. In our words: one of them, Task Fulfillment, includes your tone, and grammar is rated inside Listenability (Speaking) and Readability (Writing). CELPIP does not score modals as a separate item. In my experience, they are still the quickest way to fix tone, because one word can move a sentence from rude to polite.

1. Speaking Task 1, Giving Advice.

A friend is buying a used car.

Too strong

"You must buy a newer car. You have to check everything."

Better

"If I were you, I would ask for the service history first. You might also want to get a mechanic to look at it, and you should decide on a budget before you visit any seller."

2. Writing Task 1, an email to your building manager.

Too strong

"You must fix the washing machine immediately."

Better

"Could you please arrange a repair this week? I would be grateful for an update once a date is set."

Try the softer version in the real test format: Speaking Task 1 practice and Writing Task 1 practice, first practice set free with an account, up to three AI-scored tries.

Exercises

A. Choose the right word.

1. ___ you speak more slowly, please? (Could / Must)

2. Employees ___ wear safety boots in the warehouse. It's the law. (must / might)

3. I'm not sure, but it ___ rain later. (might / must)

4. You ___ pay now. You can pay at the end of the month. (don't have to / mustn't)

5. You ___ smoke inside the building. It's not allowed. (mustn't / don't have to)

6. Her car isn't in the parking lot. She ___ have left already. (must / can't)

7. I ___ have told you about the change earlier. I'm sorry I forgot. (should / must)

8. When I was ten, I ___ swim across the lake. (could / can)

9. Those look heavy. ___ I help you with those bags? (Shall / Must)

10. If I were you, I ___ talk to the landlord. (would / will)

11. The forecast says showers, so you ___ want to bring an umbrella. (might / must)

12. I'm taking driving lessons now, so next year I ___ drive. (will be able to / will can)

B. Find and fix the mistake.

13. He must to work on Saturday.

14. Do you can lend me five dollars?

15. My son cans ride a bike.

16. We could of taken the bus.

17. I will can visit you next month.

18. You should to see a doctor about that cough.

Answers

A. 1. Could (a polite request) 2. must (a rule) 3. might (not certain) 4. don’t have to (not necessary) 5. mustn’t (not allowed) 6. must (a confident guess) 7. should (regret) 8. could (past ability) 9. Shall (an offer) 10. would (advice with “If I were you”) 11. might (a gentle suggestion) 12. will be able to (two modals cannot sit together)

B. 13. He must work on Saturday. 14. Can you lend me five dollars? 15. My son can ride a bike. 16. We could have taken the bus. 17. I will be able to visit you next month. 18. You should see a doctor about that cough.

CELTESTPIP, Modal Verbs in English: Meanings, Examples and Mistakes (the online version of this chart). Rating areas: CELPIP Speaking and Writing Performance Standards, celpip.ca, described here in our own words. Written by Matthew Zare, CELPIP Teacher. CELTESTPIP is an independent preparation platform and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Paragon Testing Enterprises or Prometric.

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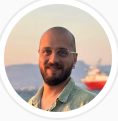

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Matthew is a CELPIP teacher on the CELTESTPIP team and the voice of most of our YouTube lessons. He focuses on helping candidates reach the CLB level their immigration or PR file needs.

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