

Modal verbs

A modal verb is a verb that is used before another verb to express meanings such as ability, permission, possibility, necessity or advice.

The modal verbs are **can, could, may, might, must, ought, shall, should, will** and **would**. **Need** and **used to** can follow some of the grammar patterns of modal verbs, but are also used like ordinary verbs. For more information about any modal verb, look in the dictionary at the entry for the word.

The grammar of modal verbs

- they are usually followed by an infinitive without *to*
You should thank him
~~*You should to thank him.*~~
- there is no 's' for the third person singular
he must, she must, it must
- they have no infinitive or -ing form
~~*I would like to can go.*~~
- they cannot follow another verb.
~~*I want to can sleep tonight.*~~
- they are not used in future, perfect or continuous tenses
~~*they will might be angry.*~~
~~*they have must leave.*~~
~~*they are canning to speak English.*~~

Example modal verb: can

Look at the extract on the right which is based on what is in the dictionary. From the guidewords, we can see that the modal verb *can* is used to describe the following ideas:

- ability
- permission
- request
- possibility
- polite offers of help

Look at the example sentences.

Notice that

- The forms of **can** for **you** and **she** are the same: *you can, she can*
- When you use modal verbs in questions or negatives you do not use auxiliary verbs such as **do** or **have**: *Can you drive?*

can (ABILITY) modal verb
to be able to

Can you drive?

She can speak four languages.

can (PERMISSION) modal verb

INFORMAL to be allowed to, either by general or personal permission

You can park over there.

You can have a piece of cake if you eat your vegetables!

can (REQUEST) modal verb

INFORMAL used informally to request something

If you see Adrian, can you tell him (= please tell him) I'm in London next weekend?

can (POSSIBILITY) modal verb

used to express possibility in the present, although not in the future

You can get stamps from the local newsagents.

can (OFFER) modal verb

used in polite offers of help

Can I help you with those bags?