

Universidad de Los Andes  
Facultad de Humanidades y Educación  
Escuela de Idiomas Modernos

### English Modal Auxiliary Verbs

<i>Ability/Possibility: Present and Future</i>	<i>Ability: Past</i>	<i>Permission</i>	<i>Polite Requests</i>
<p>CAN (more common) BE ABLE TO (formal)</p> <p>I <b>can</b> run fast. <b>Can</b> you swim? I <b>can</b> speak Spanish. John <b>can</b> lift that chair. I'm <b>able to</b> help you now.</p>	<p>COULD</p> <p>I <b>could</b> run fast when I was a child, but now I can't. You <b>could</b> run faster if you stopped smoking. I <b>could</b> read when I was four. Last night, I <b>couldn't</b> sleep at all. I had a terrible cold.</p>	<p>MAY (formal) CAN (informal)</p> <p><b>May</b> I come in? You <b>may</b> leave the room now. <b>Can</b> I hold the baby? <b>Can</b> I go with you?</p>	<p>MAY (formal, with <i>I</i> and <i>We</i>) WILL (informal) CAN (informal) WOULD (<i>please</i>) (formal) WOULD (<i>mind</i>) (formal) COULD (formal and informal) <b>May</b> I borrow your pen? <b>Will</b> you please pass the salt? <b>Can</b> I borrow your rubber? <b>Would</b> you <b>please</b> pass the pepper? <b>Would</b> you <b>mind</b> opening the door? <b>Could</b> you give me a ride to the airport?</p>
<p>WILL BE ABLE TO</p> <p>I'll <b>be able to</b> see you at noon. I <b>won't be able to</b> come tomorrow.</p>	<p>WAS/WERE ABLE TO (ability and successful performance) MANAGED TO (ability and successful performance)</p> <p>After many attempts, I <b>was able to</b> repair the car. Last night, we were locked out, but we <b>managed to</b> get into the house through the window.</p>	<p>BE ALLOWED BE PERMITTED HAVE PERMISSION TO</p> <p>No one <b>is allowed to</b> use dictionaries during the tests. <b>Were</b> you <b>permitted to</b> use the language lab? You <b>don't have permission to</b> get into that room.</p>	

<i>Possibility/Probability; Deduction, Guess or Inference: Present and Future</i>	<i>Possibility/Probability; Deduction, Guess or Inference: Past</i>	<i>Strong Wish</i>	<i>Impossibility:</i>
<p>MAY (more than 50% possibility) MIGHT (less than 50% possibility) COULD <sup>1</sup> (less than 50% possibility) MUST (95% possibility)</p> <p>A: Where's John? B: He <b>may</b> be at the library.</p> <p>According to the weather forecast, it <b>may</b> rain tonight.</p> <p>A: Where's John? B: He <b>might</b> be at the library.</p> <p>According to the weather forecast, it <b>might</b> rain tonight.</p> <p>A: Where's John? B: He <b>could</b> be at the library.</p> <p>John hasn't come today. He <b>must</b> be sick today because he wasn't feeling well yesterday.</p>	<p>MAY HAVE (more than 50% possibility) MIGHT HAVE MUST HAVE COULD HAVE</p> <p>A: Where was John? B: He <b>may have</b> been at the library.</p> <p>A: Where was John? B: He <b>might have</b> been at the library.</p> <p>A: Where was John? B: He <b>could have</b> been at the library.</p> <p>John didn't come to class yesterday. He <b>must have</b> been sick. That's the only reason for him to miss class.</p> <p>It won't have been Peter you met at the party last night. He was ill in bed. It <b>must have</b> been Simon. He looks very much like Peter.</p>	<p>MAY WILL (to GOD) WOULD (to GOD)</p> <p><b>May</b> God bless you! <b>Will</b> to God that you dreams come true! <b>Would</b> to God that you have success in life!</p>	<p>CAN'T COULDN'T (less likely than CAN'T) CAN'T HAVE COULDN'T HAVE WON'T HAVE (almost 100% certainty)</p> <p>A: John is working as an English teacher. B: That <b>can't</b> be true! He has never studied English.</p> <p>Mary <b>couldn't</b> have a ten-year-old daughter! She's only 25 herself.!</p> <p>A: The children are already sleeping. B: Oh, no! They <b>can't have</b> gone to bed yet; their bedroom light is still on.</p> <p>A: I saw John at a disco last night. B: That <b>couldn't have</b> my John! He was with me at the hospital last night. It <b>won't have</b> been Peter you met at the party last night. He was ill in bed.</p>

<sup>1</sup> When COULD expresses possibility, its negative form is not COULDN'T but MIGHT NOT.

<p><b>Future: Planned Decision or Intention</b> (thought about before the moment of speaking)</p>	<p><b>Future: Offer, Promise Willingness</b> (spontaneous intention; made at the moment of speaking)</p>	<p><b>Future: Inevitability</b></p>	<p><b>Future: Prediction Based on Evidence</b></p>
<p>BE GOING TO Present Continuous We're <b>going to</b> buy a house in Miami. We've already contacted a real estate dealer over there. Paul and Mary <b>are going to</b> get married in June. John <b>is visiting</b> his parents next week.</p>	<p>WILL SHALL (with <i>I</i> and <i>We</i>) I <b>will</b> help you clean the house this afternoon. I <b>shall</b> help you clean the house this afternoon. (Mainly BrE) We <b>shall</b> be glad to help you solve the problem. We'<b>ll</b> call you tonight. The phone is ringing; I'<b>ll</b> get it. <b>Shall</b> I get you something to drink?</p>	<p>WILL (100% certainty) SHALL (with <i>I</i> and <i>We</i>) BE BOUND TO This government has made many mistakes; it <b>will</b> surely fall soon. I <b>shall</b> pass this exam with a good grade; I've studied a lot for it. This government <b>is bound to</b> fall; it has made too many mistakes.</p>	<p>WILL (100% certainty) BE GOING TO (100% certainty) I think it <b>will</b> rain tonight; the sky is overcast. You'<b>ll</b> feel better after you've taken this medicine. You'<b>ll</b> fall off if you're not careful. I think it <b>is going to</b> rain tonight. Look at those clouds. John <b>will</b> be here at 6:00 p.m.; he's just confirmed his arrival time. John <b>is going to</b> be here at 6:00 p.m.; he's just confirmed his arrival time.</p>
<p><b>Future: Threat</b></p>	<p><b>Future: Imposition (Mandate)</b></p>	<p><b>Future: Determination</b></p>	<p><b>Future: Immediate</b></p>
<p>WILL  If you don't do your homework, I'<b>ll</b> punish you. If you don't do your homework, you <b>won't</b> watch TV tonight.</p>	<p>SHALL The Bible says, "You <b>shall</b> not commit adultery." Everybody <b>shall</b> stay indoors during the curfew hours.</p>	<p>WON'T SHALL NEVER I <b>won't</b> continue working here; I'm tired of your insults. We <b>shall never</b> visit you again; you've been too rude to us.</p>	<p>BE ABOUT TO  It's already 7:29 p.m. The movie <b>is about to</b> start. The plane <b>is about to</b> leave. Passengers are being asked to board it.</p>

<i>Future: Refusal</i>	<i>Habitual Action or Insistence: Future</i>	<i>Asking for Opinion or Consent; Making an Invitation:</i>	<i>Necessity or Strong Obligation: Present and Future</i>
<p>WON'T</p> <p>Alice <b>won't</b> do the job unless we pay her. I <b>won't</b> help you do your homework. That's your responsibility.</p>	<p>WILL (always)</p> <p>No matter how many times you ask John to participate in your project, he <b>will</b> always say that he's too busy. When Mary is nervous, she <b>will</b> bite her nails.</p>	<p>SHALL (I/we...?)</p> <p>You left the door open. <b>Shall I</b> close it for you? I'm hungry. <b>Shall we</b> have something to eat? What <b>shall</b> we do tonight? <b>Shall</b> we go out or stay at home?</p>	<p>MUST HAVE TO<sup>2</sup> HAVE GOT TO NEED</p> <p>We <b>must</b> go to class every day. You <b>have to</b> eat vegetables every day. You <b>have got to</b> make a decision urgently. I <b>need to</b> exercise every day.</p>
<i>Necessity or Obligation: Past</i>	<i>Lack of Necessity or Obligation: Present or Future</i>	<i>Lack of Necessity or Obligation: Past</i>	<i>Prohibition</i>
<p>HAD TO</p> <p>I <b>had to</b> go to class yesterday; I had a test. We <b>had to</b> sell our car in order to cover my mother's hospital expenses.</p>	<p>DON'T HAVE TO DOESN'T HAVE TO NEEDN'T<sup>3</sup></p> <p>Tomorrow is a national holiday. We <b>don't have to</b> come to class. Mary <b>doesn't have to</b> work for a living; she's already a millionaire. You <b>needn't</b> buy any milk. We've still got some left in the fridge.</p>	<p>DIDN'T HAVE TO NEEDN'T HAVE</p> <p>When I woke up, my brother had already done the shopping. So I <b>didn't have to</b> go out this morning. I mowed the lawn two days ago, so you <b>needn't have</b> mowed it again.</p>	<p>MUSTN'T CAN'T</p> <p>You <b>can't</b> use cell phones during flights. By law, you <b>mustn't</b> smoke in public building. You <b>mustn't steal</b> people's property.</p>

<sup>2</sup> The difference between MUST and HAVE TO lies in the fact that MUST expresses the decision or authority of the speaker, while HAVE TO expresses the decision or authority of another person, or refers to obligation in general.

<i>Duty, Responsibility or Mild Obligation: Present and Future</i>	<i>Advice or Suggestion: Present and Future</i>	<i>Advice or Suggestion: Past</i>	<i>Expected Behavior or Action: Present and Future</i>
<p>SHOULD OUGHT TO</p> <p>Your mother lives by herself. You <b>should</b> call her more often. Paul <b>should</b> turn in his assignment on time.</p>	<p>SHOULD OUGHT TO WOULDN'T COULD (Affirmative only)</p> <p>You're always uptight. You <b>should</b> learn to relax. You <b>ought to</b> go to bed earlier; you look tired. Guests <b>should</b> not leave valuables in their bedrooms. If I were you, I <b>wouldn't</b> yield to their demands. In order to solve the problem, you <b>could</b> offer to pay your debt in three months.</p>	<p>SHOULD HAVE OUGHT TO HAVE COULD HAVE</p> <p>John had a terrible cold yesterday. He <b>should have</b> gone to the doctor before traveling. I don't have any money today. I <b>ought to have</b> gone to the bank yesterday. You <b>could have</b> called the office before going there, so you hadn't wasted your time waiting.</p>	<p>SHOULD (90% certain) OUGHT TO (90% certain) BE SUPPOSED TO</p> <p>If everything went well on the road, John <b>should</b> be here by 6 p.m. We <b>ought to</b> be moving into our new house soon (as long as the arrangements go smoothly). Mary <b>is supposed to</b> be here now, but she hasn't arrived yet. You're <b>supposed to</b> be in class before 10.</p>
	<p>HAD BETTER (with threat of bad results)</p> <p>I <b>had better</b> leave now before the last bus passes by. You <b>had better</b> be on time, or we will leave without you.</p>	<p>WOULD RATHER HAVE (not very common)</p> <p>Instead of staying in bed, you <b>would rather have</b> gone to class so you wouldn't have missed the test.</p>	<p>BE TO (formal)</p> <p>Everyone <b>is to</b> be here at 10 a.m.</p>

<sup>3</sup> NEEDN'T is the negative form of MUST when this verb expresses necessity. DON'T/DOESN'T HAVE TO (= no obligation; you needn't do something, but you can do it if you want) is the negative form of MUST when this verb expresses strong obligation. MUSTN'T means negative obligation (= it is important that you NOT do something).

<i>Expected Behavior or Action: Past</i>	<i>Unfulfilled Expectation: Past</i>	<i>Unfulfilled Wish</i>	<i>Unfulfilled Intention</i>
<p>SHOULD HAVE (90% certain) OUGHT TO HAVE</p> <p>Mary studied all day yesterday. She <b>should have</b> done well on the test.</p> <p>Mary studied all day yesterday. She <b>ought to have done</b> well on the test.</p>	<p>WAS SUPPOSED TO WAS/WERE GOING TO</p> <p>The class <b>was supposed to</b> begin at 10:00, but it didn't begin until 10:15.</p> <p>The students <b>were supposed to</b> turn in their papers yesterday but they didn't.</p>	<p>WOULD HAVE LIKED</p> <p>I <b>would have liked</b> a cookie, but there were none in the house.</p>	<p>WAS GOING TO</p> <p>I <b>was going to</b> paint my house yesterday, but I didn't have time.</p>
<i>Preference: Present and future</i>	<i>Past Habits or Repeated Actions in the Past:</i>	<i>Repeated Actions in the Past:</i>	<i>Repeated (and Annoying) Past Actions:</i>
<p>WOULD RATHER WOULD SOONER WOULD LIKE</p> <p>I'd <b>rather</b> be a hammer than a nail.</p> <p>I <b>would like</b> to have ham sandwich, please.</p>	<p>USED TO</p> <p>I <b>used to smoke</b> when I was younger. Now I don't.</p> <p>When I was a child, I <b>used to visit</b> my grandparents every Sunday.</p>	<p>WOULD</p> <p>When I was a child, I <b>would</b> visit my grandparents every Sunday.</p>	<p>WOULD (always)</p> <p>My parents <b>would</b> always buy me the same model of shoes every year.</p>

**References:**

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