

Week 2 – MODAL VERBS - Introduction

- verbs like “*can*” or “*may*” are called **modal auxiliaries** (also **modal verbs, modals**).
- there are ten modal verbs: *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must, ought to* and three semi-modals: *need, dare and used to*

In their first use, modal verbs have basic meanings:

- can / could (ability)
- may / might (permission)
- will / would (prediction)
- shall after I/we (prediction) e.g. Will we find our way? – I’m sure we shall.
- should / ought to (duty)
- must (total obligation)
- needn’t (no obligation)

Important points about modals:

a) Modal verbs usually refer only to **the present of the future**:

e.g. I must go to the bank now. / I must go to the bank tomorrow.

The past is expressed in a different way:

- can = be able to
- must = have to
- may = be allowed to

b) we can’t use them as to-infinitives: I want *to be able to* type very fast. (not *to can type*)

c) we do not use the to-infinitive after modals: You *mustn’t tell* her.

d) there is no *-(e)s* in the 3rd person singular: The boss *can see* you now.

The second use of modal verbs

- here modals express degrees of certainty or uncertainty:

He *might* be right. He *might* know the answer. (= very uncertain)

He *could* be right. He *would* know the answer. (= fairly certain)

He *must* be right. He *must* know the answer. (= almost certain)

He *can’t* be right. He *can’t* know the answer. (= almost certain)

Modal verbs in detail – see Murphy: English Grammar in Use, U 26 – 33, 36