

They are used before other verbs and add meanings, such as certainty, possibility, obligation, ability, and permission.

You **must** be exhausted. I **can** swim. It **might** rain.

### Form

- 1 There is no -s in the third person singular.

She **can** ski. He **must** be tired. It **might** rain.

- 2 There is no *do/does/don't/doesn't* in the question or negative.

What **should** I do? **Can** I help you?  
You **mustn't** steal! He **can't** dance. I **won't** be a minute.

- 3 Modal auxiliary verbs are followed by the infinitive without *to*. The exception is *ought to*.

You **must** go. I'll **help** you. You **ought to** see a doctor.

- 4 They have no infinitives and no -ing forms. Other phrases are used instead.

I'd love to **be able to** ski.  
I hate **having to** get up on cold winter mornings.

- 5 They don't usually have past forms. Instead, we use them with Perfect infinitives.

You **should have told** me about the party. I **might have come!**

Or we use other phrases.

I **had to** work hard in school.

- 6 *Could* is used with a past meaning to talk about a general ability.

I **could** swim when I was six. (= general ability)

To talk about ability on one specific occasion, we use *was able to/managed to*.

The prisoner **was able to/managed to** escape by climbing onto the roof of the prison.

### Use

- 1 Modal verbs express our attitudes, opinions, and judgements of events. Compare:

'Who's that knocking on the door?'  
'It's John.' (This is a fact.)

'Who's that knocking on the door?'  
'It **could/may/might/must/should/can't/ll** be John.' (These all express our attitude or opinion.)

- 2 Each modal verb has at least two meanings. They can all express possibility or probability. (See Units 5 and 10.)

I **must** post this letter! (= obligation)  
You **must** be tired! (= deduction, probability)

**Could** you help me? (= request)  
We **could** go to Spain for our holiday. (= possibility)

You **may** go home now. (= permission)  
'Where's Anna?' 'I'm not sure. She **may** be at work.' (= possibility)

## ➔ 5.4 Obligation: *should*, *ought to*, and *must*

### Use

- 1 *Should* and *ought to* express mild obligation, suggestions, or advice. They express what, in the speaker's opinion, is the right or best thing to do. We often use them with *I think/don't think ...*

You're always asking me for money. I think you **should** spend less.  
You **shouldn't** sit so close to the television! It's bad for your eyes.  
You **ought to** be more careful with your money.

- 2 We often use *Do you think ... ?* in the question.

**Do you think** I should see a doctor?  
What **do you think** I should wear to the party?

- 3 *Must*, like *have to*, expresses strong obligation. *Must* can express an obligation that involves the speaker's opinion. It is personal.

I **must** get my hair cut. You **must** visit your parents.

- 4 *Must* is also associated with a formal, written style.

All visitors **must** show proper ID.

### *have to* and *must*

- 1 *Have to* and *must* are sometimes both possible.

I **must** be home by midnight. I **have to** be home by midnight.

- 2 There is sometimes a difference in meaning. *Must* usually expresses the feelings and wishes of the speaker.

I **must** buy my sister a birthday card.

*Have to* often expresses an obligation that comes from somewhere else.

I **have to** be at work by 9.00.

*Have to* is used more than *must*. If you don't know which to use, use *have to*.

- 3 Question forms with *have to* are more common.

Do I **have to** do what you say? **Must** I ...? is unusual.

Remember, *have to* has all verb forms. *Must* has no past form and can only refer to future time when used to express obligation.

### *don't have to* and *mustn't*

- 1 *Don't have to* and *mustn't* are completely different. *Don't have to* expresses absence of obligation – you can, but it isn't necessary.

You **don't have to** put a photo of you on your profile, but I usually do.  
When you go into a shop, you **don't have to** buy something.

- 2 *Mustn't* expresses negative obligation – it is important NOT to do it!

You **mustn't** steal other people's things. It's wrong.  
You **mustn't** drive if you've been drinking. You could kill someone!

### *need to*

*Need to* can also be used to express obligation. It is not a modal verb in form however, and follows the pattern of full verbs.

She **needs to** work long hours at the moment.  
**Do we need to** show our passports?  
They **didn't need to** change trains.

## ➔ 5.5 Permission: *can* and *be allowed to*

### Use

The main use of *can* is to express ability.

I **can** swim.

*Can* and *be allowed to* express permission. *Can* is more informal and usually spoken.

You **can** borrow my bike, but you **can't** have the car. I need it.  
You're **allowed to** get married when you're 16.