

Modals

Can

1. Ability: I can dance.
2. Permission: Can I leave class early?
3. Theoretical Possibility: Anybody can make mistakes. The road can be blocked.
(It is possible to block the road).

Could

1. Past Ability: He could run fast when he was a child.
2. Present or future permission: Could I go home now? Could I miss class next week?
3. Present possibility (theoretical or factual): We could go to the concert. The road could be blocked.
4. Possibility or ability in UNREAL conditions: If we had more money, we could buy a car.

May

1. Permission: May I help you?
2. Possibility (factual): The road may be blocked. (It is possible that the road is blocked.)

Might

1. Permission (rare): Might I help you?
2. Possibility (theoretical or factual): He might be late next week. He might have had an accident (that's why he's late).

Shall

1. Willingness (2nd or 3rd person): He shall get his money.
2. Intention (1st person): We shall overcome.
3. Insistence: You shall do as I say. (I insist on it.)

Should

1. Obligation: He should help her with the housework.
2. Logical necessity: You should arrive for work on time. (Your boss gave you a warning the last time you were late.)
3. After certain expressions: It's odd that you should say that. I'm sorry that this should have happened.
4. In normal real conditions: If you should change your mind, please let us know.

Will

1. Willingness (in polite requests): Will you help me, please?
2. Intention (usually contracted): I'll write as soon as I can.
3. Insistence (No contraction): We will do it, whatever you say. (He insists on it.)
4. Logical necessity: The game will be over by now.
5. Habitual present: Oil will float on water.
6. Future: I will pick you up tomorrow.

Would

1. Willingness: I would be happy to help you.
2. Insistence: He would do that. (He insists on it.)
3. Characteristic activity in the past: That's something she would always do.
4. Unreal conditions: He would smoke too much if I didn't stop him.
5. Probability: This would be his mother.

Must

1. Obligation: You must call if you're not attending class.
2. Logical necessity: That must be your mother. (You look just like her.)