BANANALEARN LEARNING LIBRARY

Modal verbs

The Garden Decision Crew





Grammar at a glance

When you want to...	Form to use	Worked example
Express ability	can + base verb	He can carry two trays.
Request permission	may/can/could + I + base?	May I sit here?
Give advice or a rule	should / must + base	You should rest. You must wear a helmet here.
Distinguish a ban from a choice	must not / do not have to	You must not enter. You don’t have to wait.
Judge evidence	might / must / can’t + base	It might be wind. We cannot see the cause.
Judge a past possibility	modal + have + participle	They might have missed the bus.

SELECT A ROW TO OPEN ITS LESSON

MODAL VERBS

Ability, modal form and the limits of a claim



Lily can lift the small empty box safely. Sam could lift it when he was younger, but an injured wrist prevents him from lifting it today. An earlier training picture, from before his injury, shows them carrying a different box together. Training records describe ability; a picture of one action cannot establish every ability.

A core modal such as can is followed by the base verb. It keeps the same form with she and they.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Ability now	Lily can lift the small box.	Can describes her present ability. It does not say she has already lifted this box.
General ability before	Sam could lift it when he was younger.	Could describes a general past ability. His current injury changes what he can do today.
Ask about ability	Can Lily lift it?	Move can before the subject; keep lift in its base form. Do not add does.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Subject	Core modal	Base verb + object
Lily	can	lift the small box

Does could always mean that a past attempt failed?

No. It can describe general past ability without reporting a particular attempt. A clear success record can be reported with managed to; neither a failure nor a success should be invented from could alone.

YOUR TURN

Choose the correct form.

She cans swims. / She can swim.

> Answer • She can swim.
> Can takes a base verb without subject agreement endings.

MODAL VERBS

Permission, polite requests and context



The supervisor allows Lily to use the watering can after checking it. Sam wants Lily to pass it to him, but permission to use it has not yet been granted to Sam. One message asks for permission; another asks someone to perform an action. A picture of watering proves neither permission nor a request.

Can, could and may can introduce requests or questions about permission. Context tells you which meaning is intended.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Ask permission	May I use the watering can?	The speaker asks whether they are allowed to use it. Can I and Could I can also ask permission.
Request an action	Could you pass the watering can?	The speaker asks the listener to act. Could makes this request more tentative; it is not a past-time report.
Grant permission	You can use it now, Lily.	In this desk conversation, can grants permission rather than describing physical ability.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

My permission request	Your action requested	Permission reply
May I use it?	Could you pass it?	Yes, you can use it after the check.

Is Can I always incorrect when asking permission?

No. It is a normal permission request. May I is often more formal, but the traditional can-versus-may slogan ignores everyday usage and the way context establishes meaning.

YOUR TURN

Which can naturally ask permission?

Can I sit here? / I must sit here.

> Answer • Can I sit here?
> Can I commonly requests permission.

MODAL VERBS

Should, ought to, must and have to



The garden's entry rule requires every visitor to wear a helmet in the repair area. The guide recommends carrying a small bottle of water for comfort. Sam supports a pot carefully with both hands; the guide recommends this method.

Should and ought to often give advice. Must and have to can express a requirement.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Recommend	You should carry water.	This offers advice in this briefing; it does not make water an entry requirement.
State a requirement	Visitors must wear helmets in the repair area.	The entry rule requires helmets. The briefing treats this as a condition, not optional advice.
Report the rule	Visitors have to wear helmets there.	Have to can also describe the requirement. It changes form: she has to; they have to.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Recommendation	Present requirement	Past requirement
should carry / ought to carry	must wear / has to wear	had to wear

Does should always mean advice, and must always mean a rule?

No. Should can express an expectation, and must can express a strong deduction. This chapter's briefing gives them advice and requirement meanings; later evidence missions use a different meaning of must.

YOUR TURN

A recommendation rather than a rule: choose the matching form.

Rest is compulsory. / You should rest.

> Answer • You should rest.
> Should gives the requested advice.

MODAL VERBS

Must not versus do not have to



Visitors must not enter the closed repair lane. They do not have to bring their own watering cans because loan cans are available; personal cans are still allowed. Bringing a can is optional, while entering the lane is forbidden.

Must not forbids an action. Do not have to means that the action is optional.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Forbidden	You must not enter the repair lane.	The action is prohibited. Choosing to enter would break the rule.
Optional	You do not have to bring a can.	There is no requirement. You may bring one or use a loan can.
Negative advice	You should not carry an overflowing pot.	This advises against an action. It is not automatically the same as a formal prohibition.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Forbidden choice	Optional choice	Equivalent optional wording
Enter lane: NO	Bring personal can: YES or NO	don't have to / needn't bring

If nobody requires an action, does that mean it is forbidden?

No. No obligation and prohibition are different. In this record personal cans are explicitly allowed, so a visitor may bring one even though they do not have to.

YOUR TURN

Entry is banned. Choose the meaning-matched form.

must not enter / do not have to enter

> Answer • must not enter
> Prohibition is not lack of necessity.

MODAL VERBS

Possibility, strong deduction and impossibility



Soil has spilled near a plant. There is no witness, and the log does not identify a cause: an animal, a person or wind is possible. Separately, a checked live tracker places the only tool cart in the locked shed.

Might leaves a possibility open. Must and can't can express strong deductions when there is evidence for them.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
One possibility	An animal might be responsible.	Might leaves this as an unconfirmed explanation. The spill picture cannot identify a cause.
Strong deduction	The tool cart must be in the shed.	Here must expresses a strong conclusion from the checked tracker, not an instruction to the cart.
Ruled out by the record	That same cart can't be on the roof now.	Under the stated reliable location record, the same cart cannot be in both places at once.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Unknown cause	Strong location inference	Excluded under this record
might / may / could be	must be in the shed	can't be on the roof now

Can a likely-looking picture prove who caused a spill?

No. Appearance may suggest an explanation, but a cause needs additional evidence. Do not label someone responsible just because an illustration makes one explanation vivid.

YOUR TURN

An unknown cause: choose a cautious report.

It is definitely wind. / It might be wind.

> Answer • It might be wind.
> The cause remains unconfirmed.

MODAL VERBS

Past deductions, missed advice and a final decision mission



At noon the log confirms that the plant has been watered. A sealed automatic system supplied no water this morning; Lily was the only person with access and the log confirms human watering. Separately, Noor had promised to check the gate before 9:00 but did not do so.

A modal followed by have and a past participle can express a judgement about the past. Might have gone leaves room for uncertainty.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Deduce a past event	Lily must have watered the plant.	Must have + past participle draws a strong conclusion from the access and watering record. Wet soil alone would not identify Lily.
Keep an event possible	Without the access log, someone else might have watered it.	Might have + past participle leaves a past explanation open under a different, incomplete record.
Look back at missed advice	Noor should have checked the gate.	Should have checked expresses what would have been advisable. The separate record establishes that she did not check.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Strong past inference	Possible past explanation	Retrospective advice
must have watered	might have watered	should have checked

Does could have always mean “had the chance but did not”?

No. It can express that meaning when the context supplies a missed opportunity, but it can also express an uncertain past explanation: someone could have watered it. Read the surrounding record.

YOUR TURN

Choose the past deduction form.

must have gone / must has went

> Answer • must have gone
> Modal + have + past participle.

ONE LAST CHALLENGE

Optional or forbidden?

Visitors may bring a notebook if they want one. They are forbidden to touch a painting. Write a notice using two different modal expressions.



A POSSIBLE ANSWER

You don’t have to bring a notebook. You must not touch the painting.

Don’t have to gives a choice. Must not states a ban.

Play Grammar Adventure

Play at bananalearn.com

More English PDFs