Modal verbs are helping verbs that add a shade of meaning to the main verb: ability, permission, possibility, duty, advice, offers and promises. They are small words with a lot of power, and once you learn their grammar pattern, they are easy to use because the pattern never changes.

The nine main modals

- can - ability or permission now: She can swim very well. Can I sit here?

- could

Grammar rules that never change

- No -s in the third person: He can drive. (never: He cans drive.)

- The

Choosing between close cousins

Must and have to are close: must often comes from the speaker's own feeling, while have to comes from an outside rule. Must not means 'do not do it', but do not have to means 'it is not necessary' - a very important difference. May is politer than can for permission, and might shows less certainty than may.

Example sentences

- *My grandmother can still walk five kilometres a day.*
- *You should see a doctor about that cough.*
- *It might snow in Murree this weekend.*
- *Students must not use phones during the exam.*
- *Would you mind opening the window?*
- *We will finish the project by Friday, I promise.*

Quick practice - choose the best modal

1. ___ you pass the salt, please? (polite request: can / must)
2. He ___ run fast when he was young, but not now. (could / may)
3. You look pale. You ___ sit down. (should / would)
4. It ___ rain later, so take an umbrella just in case. (might / shall)
5. Visitors ___ not feed the animals at the zoo. (must / might)

Answers

1. Can (Could is even politer.)
2. could - past ability.
3. should - advice.
4. might - a possibility, not a certainty.
5. must - a strict rule.