

1. MODALS (PART ONE)

A: In the present, we primarily use 'can', rather than 'be able to'. 'Be able to' has a limited meaning in the present, referring normally to a specialised skill:

For example: As a doctor, he is able to give qualified health advice.

B: 'Can', however, has no 'ing' form. So when the sentence grammar requires the use of a gerund, we can use 'being able to':

For example: Being able to speak a second language is an important skill

C: 'Can' neither has a form in the future, so for future abilities we can use 'will be able to':

For example: I'll be able to eat when I've finished work.

D: 'Can' also has no form in the past, so for past abilities we can use 'was/were able to' or 'could' interchangeably:

For example: The door was unlocked, so I could/was able to open it.

E: In English in the distant past, 'can' did have a present participle: 'cunning'. This is not used today, but the word survives with the meaning of 'astute, clever':

For example: As cunning as a fox.

2. MODALS (PART TWO)

A: In the present, 'could', 'may', and 'might' mean the same thing. They express the same level of possibility/probability:

For example: She may be busy at the moment; she might be busy at the moment; she could be busy at the moment.

B: Be careful! 'May be' and 'maybe' are different. 'Maybe' is an adverb.

For example: Maybe I'll finish studying early today.

C: We can use 'could', 'may' and 'might' with the present perfect to make a deduction about something in the past. These have the same degree of possibility/probability:

For example: The burglar could/may/might have entered through a window.

D: If you are certain, you can use 'must' with the present perfect:

For example: The burglar must have entered through a window.

E: In the negative, 'could not have' and 'may/might not have' do not mean the same thing. 'Could not have' means it was impossible; 'may/might not have' means it was only possible/probable:

For example: The burglar couldn't have entered through a window (i.e. because the window was locked) vs. The burglar may not have entered through a window (i.e. because there are other possibilities).

3. MODALS (PART THREE)

A: 'Have to' and 'must' both mean something is necessary:

For example: You have to wear a seatbelt; you must study hard to pass the exam.

B: 'Have to' and 'must' are somewhat interchangeable in informal spoken English. In certain formal contexts, there is also said to be a difference between the two. 'Have to' often refers to laws:

For example: You have to be 18 to vote.

C: 'Must' can also be used when it is not a law, but rather someone is imposing an obligation on someone else:

For example: Mum said I must finish my homework before coming down for dinner.

D: 'Must' can also be used when an institution obliges you to do something; this is like a rule (but remember, it is still not a law in the legal sense):

For example: You must fill out the registration form; you must pay your membership fee every month.

E: In informal English 'have got to' can replace both 'have to' and 'must':

For example: You've got to wear a seatbelt when driving; you've got to pay your membership fee every month.

5. PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- 1:** Rewrite the following sentence with 'can' in its *-ing* form: The ability to speak a second language is important.
- 2:** Rewrite the following sentence with 'can' in its 'will' form: I'm too busy to attend the party tomorrow.
- 3:** Rewrite the following sentence with 'can' in its past simple form: I didn't finish the homework.
- 4:** Which of the following is correct? A: *Maybe I'll visit France next year.* B: *I may be visiting France next year?* C: *I maybe visiting France next year.*
- 5:** Using a modal for deduction, describe the following situation: you wake up in the morning, and see from your window that the ground is covered in fresh snow.
- 6:** In the same context, which would be correct? A: *It may not have been cold last night.* B: *It must have been cold last night.* C: *It could have been cold last night.*
- 7:** Which is more correct in formal English? A: *By law, you have to be 18 to vote.* B: *By law, you must be 18 to vote.*
- 8:** Which is more correct in formal English? A: *You must do your homework before Friday.* B: *You have to do your homework before Friday*

Answers:
1. Being able to speak a second language is important.
2. I won't be able to attend the part tomorrow.
3. I wasn't able to finish the homework.
4. A and B
5. It must have snowed last night.
6. B
7. A
8. B