

English Modal Verbs Table

Modal verb	Usage	Example
can	ability	I can do several things at the same time.
	when something is possible	Miracles can happen.
	permission	You can go now.
	informal requests	Can you come here for a minute?
could	past form of "can"	She said she could pay for us as well.
	polite requests	Could you move your bag, please?
	possibility	We could get the train together.
may	possibility	It may rain tomorrow.
	ask for or give permission (formal)	May I speak?
might	past form of "may"	He said he might change his mind.
	possibility	This might fail.
must	you have to do it	You must obey the law.
	it's very logical or very likely to happen	They left so early, they must be home by now.
must not/ mustn't	you are not allowed to do it	You mustn't smoke in here.
shall	future for "I" and "we"	I shall see him tomorrow.
	questions and suggestions for "I" and "we"	Let's continue, shall we?
should	the right thing to do	She should call the police.
	advice	- What should I do? - You should stop thinking about it.
	what is likely or expected to happen	We should be back by midnight.
will	future action or states (not plans)	Prices will go up next summer.
	promises and intentions	It's alright, I'll pick it up.
would	past form of "will"	He told me he would come.
	imagined situations	What would you do if you were him?

	for polite requests, offers and invitations	- Would you please sit down? - Would you like some tea? - We are meeting with Sarah next Saturday, would you like to come along?
	to say what you want to do or have	I would like a piece of cake.
ought to	the right thing to do	You ought to apologize.

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English Modal Verbs – Situations Table

Situation	Modal Verb	Example
requests (formal)	may	May I sit down?
requests (informal)	can	Can I sit down?
requests (polite)	could	Could I sit down?
requests (polite)	would	Would you mind if I sit down?
permission (formal)	may	You may sit down.
permission (informal)	can	You can sit down.
obligation (full)	must	You must tell the police the truth.
obligation (partial)	should	You should tell your friends the truth.
obligation (partial) (less common)	ought to	You ought to tell your friends the truth.
logical conclusions (stronger than "should")	must	He left an hour ago, so he must be there already.
logical conclusions (weaker than "must")	should	He left half an hour ago, I believe he should be there already.
possibility (general)	can	It can rain sometimes.
possibility (weaker than "may" and "might")	could	It could rain, but it is not very common in this part of the country.
possibility (weaker than "may")	might	It's not very cloudy yet, but it might rain.

possibility (stronger than "might")	may	It's starting to get cloudy – it may rain soon.
future actions/states/intentions	will	Look at the sky! It will rain soon.

N.B. If advice has not been sought, “you should tell the truth to your friends” may be perceived as obligation. This may be inappropriate because it is very direct.

An alternative would be to say “I think we should tell the truth to our friends”.