

Modals

Modals are auxiliary verbs used most often in making requests and giving instructions. They must be followed by the base form of the verb (modal + base verb; i.e. must read, can buy, etc.).

Example: Dominique **can** read a five-hundred page novel in four hours.

The nine most commonly used modals are the pairs: *can/could*, *will/would*, *shall/should*, *may/might*, and *must* (which has no pair). In some cases the second modal in the pair is used to refer to the past (i.e. could have gone).

Example: Glenda **could** read when she was three years old.

Usually to refer to the past, you must use the modal followed by a perfect auxiliary tense

Example: If you **had** questions, you **should have gone** to your teacher.

Note: "Must" uses "had to" for its past tense:

Example: We **must** get to the store by 5 p.m.

We **had to** get to the store by 5 p.m.

In most cases, modals usually refer to the present or future.

Example: If you **have** any questions, you **should go** to your teacher.

When making requests, using the past form of the modal pairs does not change the tense but instead causes the request to sound more polite because it is less direct. Using different modals can also change the force of a request:

More Direct

More Polite



Will you get me a cup of coffee?

Can you get me a cup of coffee?

Would you get me a cup of coffee?

Could you get me a cup of coffee?

Exercise 1

Directions: For each sentence, underline the appropriate modal from the pair in parentheses.

Example: Thirty years ago, most people (cannot/could not) learn to use computers.

1. Today, few people (will/would) consider living without the conveniences they take for granted.
2. Americans (can/could) perform many daily tasks easily because tools to simplify life are widely available.
3. Financial tasks are just one example of personal responsibilities that (will/would) have been more difficult in the years before home computers.
4. Now, people (can/could) use computers to view their accounts and pay their bills.
5. With the right computer software, people (may/might) do their own taxes rather than hire accountants to do it for them.
6. Because tax laws are constantly changing, software (should/would) continue to become more sophisticated in communicating these changes.
7. Chores around the house (can/could) also take longer if people didn't have more efficient appliances.
8. What kitchen (will/would) be complete without a dishwasher or microwave?
9. Hand washing dishes (will/would) take more time and effort than using a dishwasher; furthermore, hand washing dishes (might/may) use even more water than running a machine.
10. (Would/Will) people ever miss doing chores by hand?

Answer Key:

- | | | | | |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| 1. would | 3. would | 5. might | 7. could | 9. would; might |
| 2. can | 4. can | 6. should | 8. would | 10. Will |

Exercise 2

Directions: Revise the following sentences to show the correct use of modals.

Example: Before I enrolled in college, I thought that getting a degree

would

will help me get a job.

1. I soon discovered that I must choose a major after two years of general education courses.
2. I cannot decide what field interested me most, so narrowing my decision to one particular major was difficult.
3. At the end of my second year of coursework, I must make a choice.
4. My academic counselor told me that I can change my degree tract later if I decided I wasn't happy with my decision.
5. I decided that I will study psychology.
6. When I took my first psychology course, I discovered that I can't understand some of the math required to complete my homework assignments.
7. I realized that I would have taken more advanced math courses to prepare for my psychology classes.
8. Now I am taking extra math courses to improve my skills, and I would finish my psychology degree next fall.
9. I can't wait until I start work as a psychologist.
10. In the meantime, my teachers tell me that I would study diligently to prepare for my future career.

Answer Key:

1. I soon discovered that I **had to** choose a major after two years of general education courses.
2. I **couldn't** decide what field interested me most, so narrowing my decision to one particular major was difficult.
3. At the end of my second year of coursework, I **had to** make a choice.

4. My academic counselor told me that I **could** change my degree tract later if I decided I wasn't happy with my decision.
5. I decided that I **would** study psychology.
6. When I took my first psychology course, I discovered that I **couldn't** understand some of the math required to complete my homework assignments.
7. I realized that I **should** have taken more advanced math courses to prepare for my psychology classes.
8. Now I am taking extra math courses to improve my skills, and I **should** finish my psychology degree next fall.
9. I **couldn't** wait until I started work as a psychologist.
10. In the meantime, my teachers tell me that I **should** study diligently to prepare for my future career.

Exercise 3

Directions: For each of the following sentences, fill in the blank with an appropriate modal and correct form of the verb given in the parentheses. More than one answer may be correct.

Example: People who are traveling to a foreign country, should study (study) the culture and language before their visit.

1. If I had planned more carefully, I _____ (learn) about the culture and language before traveling.
2. Within the first few weeks of my trip to Spain, I _____ (struggle) to communicate with the native people.
3. I _____ (consider) returning to my own country, but I knew I would regret it.
4. If I hadn't been so curious about Spain, I _____ (stay) in my hotel room.
5. In order to really enjoy my adventure, I knew I _____ (venture) out of my room and face the language barrier.
6. By facing my fear, I _____ (enjoy) the culture much more.
7. In fact, I _____ (move) here when I finish my degree next year.
8. Also, I _____ (have) the new friends here in Spain to help me adjust to this country.
9. Consequently, when my family comes to visit, I _____ (help) them adjust to the many cultural differences I have already encountered.

Answer Key:

1. would have learned
2. had to struggle
3. would have considered OR might have considered
4. would have stayed OR might have stayed
5. had to venture OR should venture
6. can enjoy OR will enjoy
7. may move OR will move
8. will have
9. will help OR can help