



A1 Modal Verbs Explanations

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Modal Verbs Introduction

The modal verbs are: can, could, may, might, must, will, would, shall, should. At A1/A2 level, we only study a few uses of the modal verbs. You will learn more in higher levels.

Modal verbs are funny because they don't act like normal English verbs.

1. They don't need 'do' or 'does' to make a question or a negative.
2. They don't change for 'he / she / it'.
3. They are followed by the infinitive without 'to'.

I	+	can / might	+	speak German
You	+	can / might	+	swim
He / she / it	+	can / might	+	drive on the left
We	+	can / might	+	cook
They	+	can / might	+	play the piano

We make a negative by adding 'not' to the verb. Usually we shorten it to n't.

- I can't speak Italian.
- She can't sing.

We make questions by putting the modal verb first.

- Can you play the violin?
- Can she help?

The short answers are 'yes, I can' and 'no, I can't.'

- Can she come to the meeting?
- Yes, she can / No, she can't.



‘Can’ and ‘Could’ For Ability

We use ‘can’ and ‘can’t’ to talk about a skill that we have or something that we know how to do.

This is very common with verbs like ‘speak’ or ‘play’ when we’re talking about languages, instruments, games and sports.

- She can speak Italian.
- He can play the piano.
- She can’t read yet.

We also use ‘can’ to mean something like ‘it’s possible’.

- I can come to your party. (= It’s possible for me to come to your party.)
- John can’t go to the meeting (= It’s not possible for John to go to the meeting.)

We use ‘will be able to’ to talk about ability in the future.

- I can’t speak French now, but I will be able to speak French next year. I’m studying really hard.
- At the end of the class, you will be able to make a delicious Italian meal.



‘Could’ For Past Ability

We use ‘could’ and ‘couldn’t’ to talk about ability in the past.

- I could read when I was six.
- I couldn’t read when I was two.
- Could you sing when you were young?
- He couldn’t speak Spanish until he was thirty.



‘Can’ For Requests

We often use ‘can’ to ask if it’s okay to do something.

- Can I sit here?
- Can I have some of your water?
- Can you help me later?

We answer using ‘can’ and ‘can’t’.

- Yes, you can sit there.
- I’m sorry, you can’t sit there.

We often use a short form in the answer.

- A: Can I have some of your water?
- B: Yes, you can. / No, you can’t.



‘Could’ For Polite Requests

We often use ‘could’ to make the request more polite. The meaning is the same, it’s just a little more polite.

- Could I sit here?
- Could I have some of your water?
- Could you help me tomorrow?

We still use ‘can’ and ‘can’t’ in the answer, not ‘could’ and ‘couldn’t’.

- A: Could I have some of your water?
- B: Yes, you can. / No, you can’t.



‘Can’ For Permission

We can talk about if something is okay or not okay in general using ‘can’ and ‘can’t’.

- You can’t smoke in a hospital. (= It’s not okay to smoke in a hospital.)
- You can’t travel without a train ticket.
- You can take food into the cinema.



‘Would like’ For Politeness

We also use ‘would + like + noun’ instead of ‘want’ to sound more polite, especially when we’re asking for things. We use this even if the situation is not imaginary and we can easily get the thing.

We use this very often as a question.

- What would you like?
- Which one would you like?
- Would you like tea or coffee?

Then we can use it to answer the question too.

- I would like some coffee.
- I would like a cup of tea.

We can also use ‘to + infinitive’ with ‘would + like’ to say what we want to do.

- I would like to go home early.
- I would like to meet James.

We can use ‘would like’ to talk about things that other people want too.

- She would like some cake.
- He would like to go to London.