

Modal verbs

English A2

What this topic teaches

can was one verb. Now meet the whole family: the **modal verbs** – *can, could, may, might, must, should, will, would*. They are small words that change the mood of the verb that follows.

- Family rules: one shape for all persons (*I can, she can* – no -s), and the next verb is always the base form.
- Questions flip the modal: *Can you swim? Should I go?* No *do* is ever hired.
- Memory hook: modals are remote controls . The verb does the action; the modal chooses the channel: ability, permission, duty or possibility.
- – *You **should** drink more water.* Every grandmother in both languages agrees on this one.

The family table

Modal	Channel	Example
can / can’t	ability, informal permission	I can swim. You can’t park here.
could	polite requests, past ability	Could you open the window? I could swim at five.
may / might	formal permission / possibility	May I come in? It might rain.
must	strong duty, rules	You must wear a uniform.
should	advice	You should sleep more.
would	polite offers and wishes	Would you like some tea?

- Register ladder for asking: *Can I...?* (friendly) → *Could I...?* (polite) → *May I...?* (formal). The longer the word, the higher the politeness .
- *would you like* is the politest way to offer anything: tea, help, or a window seat.

The dangerous pair: mustn’t vs don’t have to

This is the most important collision in the topic, and exams love it.

Form	Meaning	Example
mustn’t	forbidden – do NOT do it	You mustn’t smoke here.
don’t have to	not necessary – your choice	You don’t have to come early.

- *You mustn’t tell anyone* = keep the secret. *You don’t have to tell anyone* = your choice.
- Forbidden versus not necessary – one forbids, one frees. Mixing them changes a safety rule into a suggestion, or a free afternoon into a prison .
- *have to* is not a modal, but it works beside them: *I have to go* = duty from outside (rules, parents). *I must go* often sounds like your own strong feeling.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Δ **Modal + base verb only.** “*must to go*” ×, “*shoulds*” ×, “*he cans*” ×. Modals do all the grammar work; the next verb relaxes completely.
- Δ **Questions flip, no *do*.** “*Do you must go?*” × → *Must you go?* (And honestly, *Do you have to go?* is what people actually say.)
- Δ **Two modals never share a verb.** “*I will can swim*” ×. One channel per remote: *I will be able to swim*.
- Δ **The *mustn’t* / *don’t have to* pair is where Chinese instincts must be checked word by word.** *Nǐ bùbì lái* is *You don’t have to come*, not “*You mustn’t come*” – the second one means you are banned, which is a very different party.

Say it aloud

Give the class three rules, two pieces of advice and one polite request.

- Rules: You must do your homework. You mustn’t eat in the lab . You don’t have to enjoy it.
- Advice: You should drink more water. You shouldn’t read in the dark. (Grand-mothers, everywhere, approve.)
- Request: Could you lend me a pen? Would you like one of mine instead?

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *You ____ smoke here.* (forbidden) – **mustn’t**. Forbidden, not merely unnecessary.
2. *You ____ come early.* (not necessary) – **don’t have to**. Your choice; the afternoon is free.
3. *____ you lend me a pen?* (polite) – **Could**. One step up the politeness ladder from *can*.
4. *She ____ (can) swim when she was five.* – **could**. Past ability takes *could*.
5. *He must ____ (go/goes).* – **go**. Modals do the work; the verb relaxes.