

Modal verbs

English Grammar · A2

can could ()

What the modal does

can	should	must
ability	advice	obligation
<i>I can swim</i>	<i>you should rest</i>	<i>you must stop</i>

What the modal does: reference card grid

can expresses **ability** or **possibility**; **could** is the past tense of *can*, and is also used for **more polite requests**. All modal verbs are followed by the **base form** of the verb.

I can swim.

I can swim.

She could read at four.

She could read at the age of four. (Past ability)

Could you help me, please?

Could you please help me? (Polite request)

Note

- After a modal verb, use the **base form**: ~~can to swim~~ × → can swim ✓.
- Negative: cannot / can't, could not / couldn't.

should ()

should expresses **advice** or “should”.

You should see a doctor.

You should see a doctor.

We shouldn't waste water.

We shouldn't waste water.

Note: *should* gives advice and is less forceful than *must*; it is also followed by the **base form** of the verb.

must have to ()

Both express “**must**”:

- **must**: Often indicates something the speaker considers **important**, or a rule.
- **have to**: Often indicates an **external requirement** (regulation, objective necessity).

You must wear a seatbelt.

You must wear a seatbelt.

I have to get up early.

I have to get up early.

Note

- **mustn't** = “**prohibited**”: *You mustn't smoke here.* (Smoking is prohibited here.)
- **don't have to** = “**not necessary**”: *You don't have to come.* (You don't need to come.)
- Note that their meanings are completely different: one means “forbidden,” the other means “not necessary.”

Common Errors

- × ~~You must to wear a helmet.~~ → ✓ You must **wear** a helmet — All modal verbs (*can* / *could* / *should* / *must*) are followed directly by the base form and never take *to*.
- × ~~She musts study harder.~~ → ✓ She **must** study harder — Modal verbs do not take a third-person singular *-s*.

- × Wanting to say “you don’t need to come” but saying ~~You mustn’t come.~~
→ ✓ You **don’t have to** come — *mustn’t* means “forbidden,” while *don’t have to* means “not necessary.” Their meanings are exactly opposite.
- × ~~Yesterday I must work late.~~ → ✓ Yesterday I **had to** work late — *must* has no past tense; use *had to* for past obligations.