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SSC - 245

Modal Verbs

Overview: Modal verbs are a type of auxiliary (or “helping”) verb. A modal verb modifies the meaning of the main verb that follows it. The main verb that follows a modal verb stays in the base form. Unlike other helping verbs, modal verbs cannot act alone; that is, they can never function as the main verb in a sentence, so they are always paired with another verb.

Modal Verbs

Can-	expresses ability/used in questions
Could-	past tense of can/expresses possibility
May-	expresses possibility/used for asking permission
Might-	expresses possibility
Must-	expresses necessity
Should-	good idea/recommendation
Would-	past tense of will/used for asking questions
Will-	used for the future

Examples of modal verbs:

The baby <i>can</i> eat soft food now.	The baby <i>could</i> drink only milk.
The baby <i>may</i> use her pacifier now.	The baby’s nap time <i>must</i> change.
The baby <i>should</i> take her nap now.	The baby <i>would</i> like to be held.
The baby <i>will</i> go to pre-school when she’s older.	

Note that the verbs immediately following the *modal verbs* are the main verbs in the sentence and remain in the simple present tense. This is generally true for all modal verbs, UNLESS you are using a modal verb phrase, which often changes the verb tense.

Modal Verb Phrases

Modal verb phrases combine the modal verb with one or more helping verbs, which is why the tense of the main verb changes.

Modal verb + “have” + past tense verb

Margie *should have taken* the brownies home.

Modal verb + “have” + “been” + [verb + ing]

The mother *must have been wondering* where her children ran off to.

Modal verb + “have” + “to” + verb

Robert *will have to buy* diapers on his way home from work.

Practice: Modal verbs change the meaning of the main verb, so be careful when using them. For example, *the weatherman said it might rain today* is much different from *the weatherman said it will rain today*. Now check your own writing. Do you find any sentences using modal verbs or modal verb phrases? If so, are they expressing the meaning you intended? Do you find any sentences where you might employ modal verbs to help your reader better understand your meaning?