

## Modal Auxiliaries

Other helping verbs, called **modal auxiliaries** or **modals**, such as *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *ought to*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*, do not change form for different subjects.

### Uses of *Can* and *Could*

#### The modal auxiliary *can* is used

- to express ability (in the sense of being able to do something or knowing how to do something):  
He can speak Spanish but he can't write it very well.
- to expression permission (in the sense of being allowed or permitted to do something):  
Can I talk to my friends in the library waiting room? (Note that *can* is less formal than *may*. Also, some writers will object to the use of *can* in this context.)
- to express theoretical possibility:  
American automobile makers can make better cars if they think there's a profit in it.

#### The modal auxiliary *could* is used

- to express an ability in the past:  
I could always beat you at tennis when we were kids.
- to express past or future permission:  
Could I bury my cat in your back yard?
- to express present possibility:  
We could always spend the afternoon just sitting around talking.
- to express possibility or ability in contingent circumstances:  
If he studied harder, he could pass this course.

In expressing ability, *can* and *could* frequently also imply willingness: Can you help me with my homework?

### Uses of *May* and *Might*

Two of the more troublesome modal auxiliaries are *may* and *might*. When used in the context of granting or seeking permission, *might* is the past tense of *may*. *Might* is considerably more tentative than *may*.

- May I leave class early?
- If I've finished all my work and I'm really quiet, might I leave early?

In the context of expressing possibility, *may* and *might* are interchangeable present and future forms and *might + have + past participle* is the past form:

- She might be my advisor next semester.
- She may be my advisor next semester.
- She might have advised me not to take biology.

Avoid confusing the sense of possibility in *may* with the implication of *might*, that a hypothetical situation has not in fact occurred. For instance, let's say there's been a helicopter crash at the airport. In his initial report, before all the facts are gathered, a newscaster could say that the pilot "may have been injured." After we discover that the pilot is in fact all right, the newscaster can now say that the pilot "might have been injured" because it is a hypothetical situation that has not occurred. Another example: a body had been identified after much work by a detective. It was reported that "without this painstaking work, the body may have remained unidentified." Since the body was, in fact, identified, *might* is clearly called for.

### Uses of *Will* and *Would*

In certain contexts, *will* and *would* are virtually interchangeable, but there are differences. Notice that the contracted form *'ll* is very frequently used for *will*.

*Will* can be used to express willingness:

- I'll wash the dishes if you dry.
- We're going to the movies. Will you join us?

It can also express intention (especially in the first person):

- I'll do my exercises later on.

and prediction:

- specific: The meeting will be over soon.
- timeless: Humidity will ruin my hairdo.

- habitual: The river will overflow its banks every spring.

*Would* can also be used to express willingness:

- Would you please take off your hat?

It can also express insistence (rather rare, and with a strong stress on the word "would"):

- Now you've ruined everything. You *would* act that way.

and characteristic activity:

- customary: After work, he would walk to his home in West Hartford.
- typical (casual): She would cause the whole family to be late, every time.

In a main clause, *would* can express a hypothetical meaning:

- My cocker spaniel would weigh a ton if I let her eat what she wants.

Finally, *would* can express a sense of probability:

- I hear a whistle. That would be the five o'clock train.