

## Functions of Modal Verbs

### obligation/duty/necessity

- a) You **must** sign the contract.  
(You are obliged to/You have to/You need to/It is necessary.)
- b) I **must** sign the contract. (I have decided.)
- c) I **have to** sign the contract. (Someone else has decided.)

### lack of necessity

- a) He **doesn't need to/doesn't have to/needn't** get a taxi. I'll give him a lift. (It isn't necessary.)
- b) He **didn't need to** get a taxi because I gave him a lift. (It wasn't necessary for him to get a taxi.)
- c) He **needn't have got** a taxi. (It wasn't necessary for him to get a taxi, but he did.)

### advice

- a) You **ought to/should** revise for your test.  
(I advise you to/you had better)
- b) You **must** revise for your test. (I strongly advise you to.)

### suggestions

- a) We **can/could** go out for a meal later.
- b) **Shall** we go out for a meal later?  
(Let's .../Why don't we ...?/How about ...?/What about ...?)

### ability

- a) Kim is five years old. She **can** read and write. (present)
- b) When she was three, she **could** count to ten.  
(past repeated action)
- c) Tony **was able to** win the race. (managed to do; past single action)

### lack of ability

- a) Ann **can't** play the piano. (present)
- b) She **couldn't** swim fast when she was young.  
(past repeated action)
- c) She **couldn't** reach the top shelf, even though she tried. (past single action)

### asking permission

- a) **Can** I open the window, please? (informal)
- b) **Could** I open the window, please? (more polite)
- c) **May/Might** I open the window, please? (formal)  
(Do you mind if ...?/Would you mind if ...?)

### giving permission

- a) You **can** leave your luggage here.  
(you are allowed to do sth; informal)
- b) You **may** leave your luggage in this area.  
(you are allowed to do sth; formal - probably written)

### refusing permission

- a) You **can't/mustn't** park here.  
(you are not allowed to do sth; informal)
- b) You **may not** park in this area.  
(you are not allowed to do sth; formal - usually written notice)

### requests

- a) **Can/Will** you help me with this exercise? (informal)
- b) **Could/Would** you help me with this exercise?  
(more polite)
- c) **May** I have one of those leaflets? (formal)
- d) **Might** I have one of those leaflets? (very formal)

### prohibition

You **mustn't/can't** lie in court. (it's forbidden/you aren't allowed to/it's against the rules)

### asking for suggestions or instructions

When/How **shall** I contact you?

### possibility

- a) She **could/may/might** finish her work by six o'clock.  
(it is possible/it is likely/perhaps)
- b) She **could/might have been** late. (... Luckily, she wasn't late.)

### offers

**Shall/Can/Could** I help you cross the road?  
(Would you like me to help you cross the road?)

### logical assumptions

- a) She **must** be on holiday. (positive; I'm sure she is.)
- b) She **can't** be working. (negative; I'm sure she isn't.)
- c) He **must have been** on holiday. (positive)
- d) He **can't have been** at home. (negative)

### criticism

He **ought to/should have told** her the truth.  
(It would have been better if he had told her the truth.)