

Common Modal Usage

The following charts are useful tools for explaining the different uses of modal verbs in the present tense and in both the positive and negative forms:

Can:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Ability</i>	"I can speak English."	"I cannot speak French."
<i>Permission</i>	"You can help yourself to anything."	"You cannot go into this room."
<i>Probability</i>	"We can go to Europe this summer."	"It cannot cost more than \$5."
<i>Desire/Request</i>	" Can I come with you?"	" Can't you just stay home this weekend?"

Could:

Use	Positive	Negative
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<i>Ability (past)</i>	"I could do 8 pushups when I was ten."	"I couldn't jump high when I was hurt."
<i>Permission/ Request</i>	" Could I borrow your pencil?"	" Couldn't he come with us?"
<i>Probability</i>	"He could win the race today."	"You couldn't be the one who stole it."
<i>Conditional</i>	"If I had money, I could buy a car."	"If I didn't sleep in, I wouldn't be late."
<i>Suggestion</i>	"You could just stay home."	NONE

May:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Permission</i>	"You may leave your things here."	"You may not leave until you finish."
<i>Probability</i>	"He may be mad at you, I can't tell."	"He may not want you to be there."
<i>Desire/Request</i>	" May I use your bathroom, please?"	NONE

Might:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Possibility</i>	"She might come a little late."	"She might not come today."

<i>Conditional (may)</i>	"If I study hard, I might pass."	"If I don't study hard, I might not do well."
<i>Desire/request</i>	" Might I have a glass of water?"	NONE

Must:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Certainty</i>	"That must be the right answer!"	"This must not be the right address."
<i>Necessity</i>	"You must have shoes to enter."	<i>Changes to 'have to' → "You don't have to wear shoes."</i>
<i>Suggestion</i>	"You must come to the party!"	"You mustn't spoil your appetite."
<i>Prohibition</i>	NONE	"You must not talk to strangers."

Shall:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Future action</i>	"I shall be there before sunrise."	"I shall not be there."
<i>Promise</i>	"I shall have everything ready for you."	"I shall always remember this moment."

<i>Question</i>	"Shall I pick you up at five o'clock?"	Changes to 'should' → "Should I not come?"
<i>Inevitability</i>	"The hard times shall pass."	"We shall not back down."

Should:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Advice/recommendation</i>	"You should eat healthier."	"You should not smoke."
<i>Obligation</i>	"I should wake up early so I'm not late."	NONE
<i>Expectation</i>	"They should arrive around noon."	"They shouldn't be there yet."

Will:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Future action</i>	"The class will end in 2 hours."	"She will not come to class today."
<i>Promise</i>	"I will take care of everything."	"I will not let you down."

Would:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Conditional</i>	"If I were rich, I would buy a plane."	"If I were rich, I would not be stressed."
<i>Past of will</i>	"I told you I would come."	"They said they wouldn't help us."
<i>Habitual (past)</i>	"When I was young, I would cry a lot."	"When I got older, I wouldn't climb trees."
<i>Preference</i>	"I would rather stay home than go out."	"I would rather not clean than play games."
<i>Suggestion</i>	"I would go if I were you."	"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Ought to:

Use	Positive	Negative
<i>Advice/recommendation</i>	"You ought to exercise more."	<i>Loses the 'to'</i> → "You ought not be late."
<i>Expectation/Assumption/Probability</i>	"She ought to be there by the time I arrive."	NONE