

Modals (I)

I- Ability

Use **can** or **be able to** to talk about ability in the present, **can't** or **be** (in the present simple) + **not + able to** for things which are not possible. In everyday speech, **can** is more common than **be able to** in the present tense because it's shorter and less formal.

Ex: Houda **can** speak five languages, but she **can't** speak Spanish.

The doctor **is able to** see you now, but she **isn't able to** see you tomorrow.

Use either **could (couldn't)** or **was/ were (not) able to** to talk about ability (but not a specific achievement) in the past.

Ex: Mariam **wasn't able to / couldn't** do all the questions in the math exam.

Be careful! Use **managed to** or **was/ were able to** to talk about a specific achievement or a single event in the past.

Ex: Dad didn't have any money on him, but fortunately he **was able to** use his credit card to pay the bill. NOT ~~**could** use his credit card to pay the bill.~~

For forms and sentences other than the present or past, use **be able to**.

Ex: I've been very busy so I **haven't been able to** finish reading the novel. (Present perfect)

When you finish the course, you'll **be able to** speak English very well. (Future simple).

Note that we do not use **be able to** in the continuous tense.

II- Permission

Use **may**, **could** and **can** to ask for permission. Note that **may** is a little more formal than **can** and **could**.

Ex: **May** I call you next Friday?

Could we use your car?

Be careful! Requests for permission always refer to the present or the future. When you use **could** to ask for permission, it is not the past.

Ex: **Could** I take the test tomorrow?

We often say **please** when we ask for permission. Note the possible word orders.

Ex: **Could** I ask a question, *please*?

Please could I ask a question?

Use **do you mind if ..?** to ask for permission when your action might bother someone. Be careful! A negative answer to the question **do you mind if ..?** gives permission to do something. It means: it's OK. I don't mind.

Ex: A: **Do you mind if** I clean up tomorrow?

B: Yes, actually, I do mind. I hate to see a mess.

A: **Do you mind if** I leave the room?

B: **Not at all.** (You may leave the room).

Use **may** or **can** in answers. Do not use **could**. **Be careful!** Do not contract **may not**.

Ex: A: **Could** I borrow this pencil?

B: Yes, of course you **can**. NOT ~~Yes, you could.~~

C: No, you **may not**. NOT ~~No, you mayn't.~~

We often use *polite expressions* instead of modals to answer requests for permission.

Ex: A: **Could** I close the window?

B: **Sure. /Certainly. /Go ahead. /No, please don't.** It's hot in here.

When people refuse permission, they often give an apology and an explanation. If the rules are very clear, someone may refuse without an apology or explanation.

Ex: A: Can I have a little more time?

B: **I'm sorry, but the time is up.**

Driver: Can I park here?

Officer: **No, you can't.**

III- Requests

Use **will**, **can**, **would** and **could** to ask someone to do something. We often use **will** and **can** for informal requests. We use **would** and **could** to make requests more polite.

Ex: Sister: **will** you answer the phone? **Can** you turn down the TV?

Boss: **Would** you type this report? **Could** you make ten copies?

We also use **please** with **will, can, would** and **could** to make the request even more polite. Note the word order.

Ex: **Could** you **please** close the door?
Could you close the door, **please**?

We also use **would you mind + gerund** (without please) to make polite requests. Note that a negative answer means that you will do what the person requests.

Ex: **A: Would you mind waiting** for a few minutes? Mr. Smith is still at a meeting.
B: Not at all. (OK I'll do it).

People usually expect us to say **yes** to polite requests. When we can't say yes, we usually apologize and give a reason. *Be careful!* Do not use **would** or **could** to answer polite requests.

Ex: **A: Could** you take this to Maha's office for me?
B: I'm sorry, I can't. I'm expecting an important phone call.
A: I'm cold, would you shut the window, please?
B: Certainly. NOT ~~Yes, I would.~~

IV- Advice

Use **should** and **ought to** to say that something is advisable. We do not usually use the negative of ought to in American English. We use **shouldn't** instead.

Ex: Ali **should** find a new job.
 He **ought to** read the help wanted ads.
 You **shouldn't** quit school. NOT ~~You ought not to quit school.~~

Use **had better** for urgent advice when you believe that something bad will happen if the person does not follow the advice. We usually use the contraction for had better. The negative of had better is **had better not**. *Be careful!* Had better always refers to the present or the future, never to the past (even though it uses the word had).

Ex: You'**d better** leave now, or you'll be late.
 You'**d better** apply for more than one job. NOT ~~You had better apply...~~
 You'**d better not** be late. NOT ~~You'd not better be late.~~
 You'**d better** call them back tomorrow.

Use **should** for questions. We do not usually use ought to or had better for questions.

Ex: **Should** I apply for that job?

When **should** I apply?

It is usually considered impolite to give advice to people of equal or higher status (such as friends or bosses) unless they ask for it. When we give unasked-for advice, we often do it with **maybe**, **perhaps** or **I think**.

Ex: Friend: **Should** I shake hands with the interviewer?

You: Yes, you **should**.

Marya, **maybe** you **ought to** apply for this job.

V- Suggestions

Use **let's**, **(Maybe)...** **could**, **Why don't/ doesn't**, **Why not**, and **How about** to make suggestions. *Be careful!* When someone uses **why not** and **Why don't/doesn't** to make a suggestion, these expressions are not information questions. The speaker does not expect to receive information from the listener.

Ex: Suggestion: **Why don't** you visit Hina in Hong Kong?

Information question: **Why don't** you eat meat?

Let's and **shall we** always includes the speaker. It means: here's a suggestion for you and me.

Ex: **Let's** go to Hong Kong. (I suggest that we go to Hong Kong).

Shall we visit Hiba?

Note the different forms to use with these expressions.

Base form of the verb: **Let's** take the train.

Maybe we **could** take the train.

Why don't we take the train?

Gerund or noun: **How about** taking the train?