

## Grammatically Speaking

by [Michelle Jackson](#)

### How to Teach English Modal Verbs

We live in a world that is far from black and white and is much more gray. We often call upon language to signal this ambiguity. A loved one *may* call—if we are lucky. Our favorite team *should* win—if the refs are on our side. A party *could* run late—if the music is good. There is no certainty. Our world is abundantly and beautifully messy and riddled with unpredictability. Linguistically, we are able to express the variations of unpredictability in our world through the use of modals. Modals represent a hypothetical reality, a liminal space where our hopes might become reality, though their outcome is, as of yet, unknown.

For students learning English, the acquisition of modals provides them with the linguistic agility necessary to express ambiguity and the reality of their lived experiences. Modals allow us to express possibility: what *must* happen, what *could* occur, or what *should* happen. To capture the uncertainty of the world we live in, we need modals. To help college-level introductory students acquire modals, teachers often use sample sentence sets. Students compare and contrast similarities and differences among correctly and incorrectly formed sentences. This comparison allows them to infer the appropriate structure for sentences with modals.

### Materials Required

- Copies of the included sample sentences
- Paper and writing utensils for all students
- Chalkboard, whiteboard, or doc cam & writing utensils

**Timing:** 20–30 minutes

### Step 1

Provide students with the following information:

**Definition:** Modal verbs combine with another verb to express necessity, possibility, or ability.

**Examples include:** *must, should, might, may, could, can, would, will*

Explain to students that, rather than you providing them with a detailed explanation of the grammar rules, they are going to develop the rules by analyzing data. They will look at samples of language to determine how to form appropriate statements with modals. (5 minutes)

### Step 2

Break students into groups of three or four. Provide them with the sample sentences below. Inform them that any sentence without an asterisk (\*) is correct, while any sentence with an asterisk (\*) is incorrect. (2 minutes)

### Step 3

As a group, students will

- identify the modal verb in each sentence,
- analyze the sample sentences for linguistic patterns (e.g., What must follow a modal verb? What cannot follow a modal verb?),
- create a list of grammar rules regarding how to form statements, and
- share their rules with the class. (7 minutes)

### Step 4

Have one student from a group explain to the class one rule they developed based on the data. (2 minutes)

### Step 5

Ask other students if they agree or disagree with the rule. Allow for discussion. If students agree on the rule, the teacher writes it on the board and moves to another group. (4 minutes)

Some rules that should be mentioned:

- A modal should be followed by the base form of the verb
- No modal can be used alone
- No two modals can be used together

Repeat Steps 4 and 5 as necessary.

If students are having difficulty coming up with the rules, you may want to offer a hint (e.g., “Look at what always follows the modal in the sample set.”). Be careful not to offer hints too soon, as students may then expect the rules to be given to them.

### Optional Extension

This lesson is by no means an exhaustive explanation of modals, as we are missing sentences that demonstrate negation (e.g., Yael might *not* meet her friends after class). The sample sentences provided below could be amended for a second activity that allows students to determine the rules for expressing negation.

#### Sample Sentences

##### Necessity

Sung ho must call his family.

- \*Sung ho must to call his family.
- \*Sung ho must calls his family.
- \*Sung ho must called his family.
- \*Sung ho must will call his family.
- \*Sung ho must his family.

### **Possibility**

- Yael might meet her friends after class.
- \*Yael might to meet her friends after class.
- \*Yael might meets her friends after class.
- \*Yael might met her friends after class.
- \*Yael might will meet her friends after class.
- \*Yael might her friends after class.

### **Ability**

- Daniela can run five miles.
- \*Daniela can to run five miles.
- \*Daniela can runs five miles.
- \*Daniela can ran five miles.
- \*Daniela can will run five miles.

Happy teaching,  
Michelle

---

***Dr. Michelle Jackson*** is the associate director of teaching at New Mexico State University's Teaching Academy. She designs, develops, and delivers workshops on a variety of teaching and learning topics. Prior to NMSU, she was the manager of the English Language Institute at UT El Paso. She has taught English as a second language at UT El Paso and Harvard University as well as Spanish at UT Austin.