Modal verbs

Past and Present
Ability
Can and be able to

*Can*, like all modal verbs, cannot be used in an infinitive or continuous form.

We use *be able to* in situations where we need these forms.

- *I'd like to be able to swim.*
- *Not being able to swim is annoying.*
Certainty

and

Uncertainty
Must and can't
These words have a meaning related to certainty - they are used to make deductions.
This is when we are sure or almost sure about something because it is logical.
This usage is especially common with the verb be.

• You *must be tired after your long journey.* *(I'm sure you are)*

• *That can't be Sue. She's in Brazil.* *(I'm sure it's not possible)*
May, might and could

These words all express uncertainty or possibility. *Could is not used with not in this context.*

- *I might go out, I don't know. I could get wet!*

The meaning for all three words is approximately 50 per cent probability.

But if we stress the modal verb strongly in speech the probability is reduced.

- *I might see you later if I finish my work, but don't count on it.* *(might is strongly stressed in speech)*
These words are both used for obligation. But they also have a meaning related to certainty - they are used when we expect that something will happen.

- Brenda *should be* home by now. (I expect that she is)
**Be bound to**

This is used to say that something is certain to happen in the future.

- *You're bound to see* Paula if you go there.
  
  (I'm sure you will)
Obligation
**Must and have to**

In writing there is *no real* difference between these words.

In speech there is sometimes a small difference.

*Must* is used when the **speaker personally** feels something is important and *have to* is used when **the situation** makes something necessary.
Examples

- You **must** start working harder! (I say so)
- You **have to** turn left here. (it's the law)
- Sorry, I **must leave/have to leave** now.
  (in this example there is no difference)
Be careful: must and have to are very similar in their affirmative forms but they are completely different in their negative forms.
Mustn't describes something which is prohibited. Don't have to describes something which is not necessary.

• You **mustn't** leave now. (It's not allowed. It's against the rules.)

• You **don't have to** leave now. (It's not necessary. You have a choice.)
Should and ought to

These words have the same meaning. They are used to say what is the best thing to do. They can be used to give an opinion, some advice, or polite instructions.

- *We should* do something different for our holidays this year.
- *I think you should* see a doctor.
- *You ought not to* smoke if you're pregnant.
- *You should* send in your application by July 18th.
Had better

This phrase gives **strong advice** about how to stop something going wrong.

It can refer to present or future time.

• *I think you'd better leave now.*
  
  *(before it is too late)*

• *You'd better not drive.*
  
  *(it might be dangerous)*
Is/Are to

This is used in formal instructions. Not is stressed.

• No-one is to leave the room.
• You are not to leave the room.
Choose the correct word or phrase in each sentence.

a) There's someone at the door. It can/must be the postman.
b) Don't worry, you don't have to/mustn't pay now.
c) I think you had better/would better take a pullover with you.
d) Jones could/must be president if Smith has to resign.
e) Sorry, I can't stay any longer. I have to/might go.
f) It was 5 o'clock an hour ago. Your watch can't/mustn't be right.
g) It's a school rule, all the pupils have to/must wear a uniform.
h) I suppose that our team must/should win, but I'm not sure.
i) Let's tell Diana. She could/might not know.
j) In my opinion, the government might/should do something about this.
Answers

a)  must
b)  don’t have to
c)  had better
d)  could
e)  have to
f)  can’t
g)  have to
h)  should
i)  might
j)  should
Choose the most suitable word or phrase in each sentence.

a) We can't be lost. It isn't allowed/I don't believe it.
b) Jane is bound to be late. She always is/She must be.
c) Late-comers are to report to the main office. It's a good idea/It's the rule.
d) You don't have to stay unless it's necessary/if you don't want to.
e) Astronauts must feel afraid sometimes. They're supposed to/It's only natural.
f) You can't come in here. It isn't *allowed*/I don't believe it.

g) All motorcyclists have to wear crash helmets. *It's a good idea*/It's the rule.

h) I ought not to tell Jack. *It's not a good idea*/It's the rule.

i) We should be there soon. *I expect so*/It's absolutely certain.

j) You'd better leave now. *That's my advice*/That's an order!
Answers

a) I don’t believe it.
b) She always is.
c) It’s the rule.
d) if you don’t want to.
e) It’s only natural.
f) It isn’t allowed.
g) It’s the rule.
h) It’s not a good idea.
i) I expect so.
j) That’s my advice.
Key points

1 Most modal auxiliaries have more than one meaning. You should think carefully about the context, or tone of voice, to understand the meaning.

2 The negative forms *mustn't* and *don't have to* have different meanings.
   - You *mustn't go.* (it's against the rules)
   - You *don't have to go.* (it isn't necessary)

3 In normal speech *should* is a weaker obligation than *must* and *have to*.
   - You *should* go to the doctor. (I think it's a good idea)
   - You *must* go to the doctor. (it's necessary)

But in formal speech or writing *should* can be a way of expressing a strong obligation.

- *Passengers for Gatwick Airport should* change at Reading.
Modal verbs

past
Explanation
Ability

*Could* and *was able to*

To talk about *general* past ability we use *could*.

- *When I was young, I could run very fast.*

To talk about *one* specific past action we use *was able to*.

- *Luckily, Mary was able to help us.*
Uncertainty and Certainty
Must have and can't have

These are used to make **logical** deductions about past actions.

- *I must have left my wallet in the car.*
  (I am sure I did)
- *Jim can't have noticed you.*
  (I am sure he didn't)
May have, might have and could have

These express possibility or uncertainty about past actions.

• Jean **might** have missed the train.
  (perhaps she did)

• He **may not have** received the letter.
  (perhaps he didn't)

• You **could** have been killed!
  (it was a possibility)
Was/Were to have

This describes something which was supposed to happen, but didn't.

It is formal in use.

• He was to have left yesterday.
  (he was supposed to leave, but he didn't)
Obligation
**Had to**

**Must** has no past form, so we use **had to**.

- *Sorry I'm late, I **had to** take the children to school.*

The question form is: *Did you have to?*

- *Did you have to work late yesterday?*
Should have and ought to have

These express the feeling that a mistake was made.

There is a criticism.

• I *should have* posted this letter yesterday.
  (I didn't do the right thing)

• You *shouldn't have* told me the answer.
  (you were wrong to do so)
**Needn't have and didn't need to**

There is a slight difference between these two forms. Compare:

**A.** I *needn't have* arrived at seven.

**B.** I *didn't need to* arrive at seven.

**A.** I arrived at seven, but it wasn't necessary.

**B.** We don't know when I arrived - maybe seven or later.

But in everyday speech we often use *didn't need to* for both cases.
Choose the most suitable response to each comment or question

a) A: What did I do wrong?
   B: 1) You shouldn't have connected these two wires.
       2) You didn't have to connect these two wires.

b) A: Why is the dog barking?
   B: 1) It should have heard something.
       2) It must have heard something.

c) A: Why are you home so early?
   B: 1) I needn't have worked this afternoon.
       2) I didn't have to work this afternoon.

d) A: Why did you worry about me? I didn't take any risks.
   B: 1) You must have been injured.
       2) You could have been injured.
e) A: You forgot my birthday again!  
   B: 1) Sorry, I should have looked in my diary.  
       2) Sorry, I had to look in my diary.

f) A: We had a terrible crossing on the boat in a storm.  
   B: 1) That didn't have to be very pleasant!  
       2) That can't have been very pleasant!

g) A: Where were you yesterday? You didn't turn up!  
   B: 1) I had to go to London.  
       2) I must have gone to London.

h) A: What do you think about the election?  
   B: 1) The Freedom Party had to win.  
       2) The Freedom Party should have won.

i) A: There's a lot of food left over from the party, isn't there?  
   B: 1) Yes, you couldn't have made so many sandwiches.  
       2) Yes, you needn't have made so many sandwiches.

j) A: What do you think has happened to Tony?  
   B: 1) I don't know, he should have got lost.  
       2) I don't know, he might have got lost.
Answers

a) 1
b) 2
c) 2
d) 2
e) 1
f) 2
g) 1
h) 2
i) 2
j) 2
Choose the most suitable phrase in each sentence.

a) We should have turned left. We've missed the turning/We followed the instructions.

b) We didn't have to wear uniform at school. But I never did/That's why I liked it.

c) The butler must have stolen the jewels. He was ordered to/There is no other explanation.

d) You could have phoned from the station. I'm sure you did/Why didn't you?

e) You needn't have bought any dog food. There isn't any/There is plenty.

f) Ann might not have understood the message. I suppose it's possible/She wasn't supposed to.

g) You can't have spent all the money already! You weren't able to/I'm sure you haven't.

h) I shouldn't have used this kind of paint. It's the right kind/It's the wrong kind.
Answers

a) We’ve missed the turning.
b) That’s why I liked it.
c) There is no other explanation.
d) Why didn’t you?
e) There is plenty.
f) I suppose it’s possible.
g) I’m sure you haven’t.
h) It’s the wrong kind.