

Table Of Contents:

- [Modal verbs for certainty](#)
- [Certainty about the present](#)
- [Certainty about the past](#)
- [Modal verbs for uncertainty](#)
- [Uncertainty about the present](#)
- [Uncertainty about the past](#)

We can use modal verbs to talk about **probability** or **improbability** of something, as well as to **make deductions** about some facts or events.

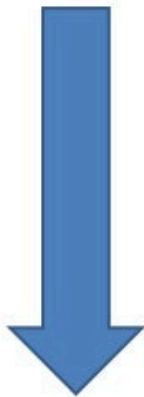


via <http://wilsworldofwords.com/2014/04/modal-verbs-for-deduction.html>

Depending on the information available, we might be more or less certain that your conclusion is true - and we use different modal verbs to indicate the degree of certainty. Look at the picture illustrating modal verbs expressing the degree of certainty:

## Making deductions (certainty and uncertainty)

### ⊙ Extremely Certain (positive)



### ⊙ Extremely Certain (negative)

#### must

- ⊙ She **must be** on holidays. (PRESENT)
- ⊙ Someone **must have called** her. (PAST)

#### may/ might

- ⊙ She **might/may be** a smoker. (PRESENT)
- ⊙ She **might/may have fallen** in love with that boy. (PAST)

#### can't

- ⊙ She **can't be dead**. (PRESENT)
- ⊙ She **can't have disappeared**. (PAST)

via <https://www.slideshare.net/nlopez74/modals-of-deduction>

## Modal verbs for certainty

### Certainty about the present

— To speak with **certainty** about things in present, we use '**must**':

- John **must be** very tired, he's been staying in bed all day long.
- They **must be** absent, I cannot find them anywhere.

— To speak about something you consider absolutely **impossible**, use '**cannot (can't)**':

- Jack **cannot be** at school, I saw him playing basketball at the playground.
- Pete's leg **can't be** broken, he walked to the doctor without any help.

## Certainty about the past

To speak about something that you think **definitely happened** in the past, use ‘**must have**’ with the **Past Participle**:

- *I can't find my socks. My wife **must have taken** them to the laundry room.*
- *Nobody opens the door, my friend **must have left** the house already.*

— To speak about something you are absolutely sure **did not happen in the past**, use ‘**couldn't have**’:

- *I saw a flash in the sky, but it **couldn't have been** aliens, they don't exist.*
- *Paula **couldn't have been** at the party last night, she was at work.*

## Modal verbs for uncertainty

### Uncertainty about the present

— To talk about something with uncertainty, use modal verbs ‘**might**’ and ‘**could**’:

- *Sarah isn't feeling well. She **might have** a cold.*
- *I have a high temperature. It **could be** a flu.*

— To describe **negative** things you are not certain about, use ‘**might not**’:

- *Your leg is not swollen, so it **might not be** serious.*
- *I can't reach Tom by phone, he **might not be** in the city.*

### Uncertainty about the past

In case you **are not sure** whether something happened in the past, use ‘**may have**’, ‘**might have**’ or ‘**could have**’ instead of ‘**must have**’:

- *Cindy didn't return my call yesterday. She **might have forgotten** to call me back.*
- *I didn't see who knocked on the door, but it **may have been** the postman.*

Check out this short video from Learn English with KT to understand the difference between ‘must’, ‘can’t’, ‘could’, and ‘might’ for making deductions:

Read more on modal verbs:

[Modal Verbs: Overview](#)

[Modal Verbs for Possibility](#)

[Modal Verbs for Obligations](#)