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We can use modal verbs to talk about **probability** or **improbability** of something, as well as to **make deductions** about some facts or events.
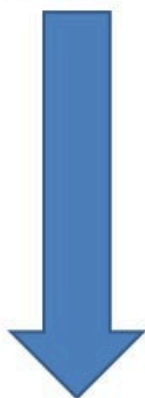
via http://wilsworldofwords.com/2014/04/modal-verbs-for-deduction.html

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:

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](#)