Modal verbs are very common and useful in English. We use them to talk about ability, permission, obligation, requests, offers, suggestions and more.

Modal verbs can express multiple states and intentions. Some of them have different meanings depending on a situation. For example, we can use the verb ‘can’ to talk about ability, possibility, to ask for permission, to make a request or to offer help.
Meanings of modal verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ability         | *I can play football.*  
                  *Tom couldn’t visit us because he was tired.* |
| Permission      | *You may have more ice-cream if you like.*  
                  *Could I leave early today?* |
| Requests        | *Can / Could you bring me that book?*  
                  *Would you call John and invite him, please?* |
| Offers          | *I’ll buy the meat for the barbecue.*  
                  *Shall I carry some of your bags?* |
| Suggestions and advice | *You should / ought to go to the dentist.*  
                  *We could try that new Italian restaurant.* |
| Obligation      | *You have to drive on the left in the UK.*  
                  *You mustn’t be late for work.* |
| Deductions      | *There is someone at the door. It could / might / may be Nick, I don’t know.*  
                  *It can’t be Mary because she is on vacation.* |

How to use modal verbs

1. All modal verbs, except for ‘ought’ and ‘have’ require no preposition (‘to’) with the following verb:
   - *I can* dance.
   - *You should* go.
   - *You must* be careful.
   - *I have to read* a lot to become a good student.
   - *You ought to* observe the rules.
2. Modal verbs in English don’t add an ‘s’ for he/she/it. They are always followed by the main verb in the base form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Modal verb</th>
<th>Base form of the verb</th>
<th>Rest of the sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (you, he, she, it, we, they)</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>dance</td>
<td>very well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. All modal verbs don’t require any auxiliary verbs to form questions and negative forms. Negative statements are formed by adding ‘not’ after the modal verb:

- You should not (shouldn’t) eat so much meat – it’s bad for you.
- Jack can not (can’t) play tennis, but he likes playing football.

4. Questions with modal verbs are usually formed by swapping the subject and modal verb:

- They should visit Egypt.
- Why should they visit Egypt?

- You may come in.
- May I come in?

- Tiffany can meet her friends tonight.
- Can Tiffany meet her friends tonight?

Here’s a good video from mmmEnglish containing some tips and useful information use modal verbs correctly:

Read more on this topic:

- Modal Verbs: Overview
- Modal Verbs for Ability