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The modal verbs (or modals for short) of permission are **can**, **could** and **may**. These verbs are used to politely ask for permission, to make a request, and to offer help to someone.

Modals of Permission

Unlike statements, when asking for permission or making a request, we use the reverse order, i.e. the modal verb goes before the subject:

Can / Could / May + subject + the verb

Can

We often use the modal verb '**can**' to ask for permission or to make a request. **Can**' is the least formal of these verbs. We use it when we are asking a friend or someone we know for something in an informal situation; or if we are asking someone we don't know for something which is small or unimportant.

Examples of the modal verb 'Can' to request permission:

- **Can I have some cookies?** - Yes, you can.
- **Can I borrow your pen, please?** - Sure!
- **Can I use your bathroom?** - Of course!
- **Can I open the window?**

Could

'**Could**' is a little more polite than 'can', so we can use it in more formal situations, like talking to your boss or a stranger, or to ask for something more important.

Examples of the modal verb 'Could' to request permission:

- *Excuse me, **could I** sit here, please?* - I'm sorry, but you can't. This seat is taken.
- ***Could I** have your attention, sir?* - Sure.
- ***Could you** tell me the way to the town center, please?* - Of course, it's straight ahead.

May

The verb '**May**' is similar to 'could' but it is even more polite. It is considered a little old-fashioned, so people don't use it very often these days.

Examples of the modal verb 'May' to request permission:

- ***May I** make an appointment for Tuesday?* - Yes, you may.
- ***May I** begin?* - Of course.
- ***May I** have a glass of water?* - Sure, here you are.

Note: Like in examples above, we can give someone permission with the words 'can' or 'may', or we can say 'yes', 'of course' or 'sure.'

Modals of Request

We can use the verbs '**can**' and '**could**' to ask for something.

Like with asking permission, the verb '**can**' is used in more *informal* situations, while '**could**' and '**may**' are suitable for *polite* requests.

- ***Can you** help me lift this box?*
- ***Could I** please use your bathroom?*
- ***May I** use your phone?*

Modals to Give Permission

We can use modal verbs '**can**' and '**may**' (but NOT '*could*') to **express permission** or say that **someone has permission**. The difference between them is the same as in previous examples: '*may*' is a **more formal** and polite way of saying that, while '*can*' is used in less formal situations.

- You **can come** with us.
- Students **can sit** anywhere.
- **You may go** home now, if you like.
- Students **may travel** free.

To give permission, we can say something like '*Yes, you can*' or '*Yes, of course / Yes, no problem.*' '*Yes, you may*' is very formal and not used very often.

To refuse permission responses include '*No, sorry, you can't*' and '*I'm afraid not*'. Again, using *may not* is very formal and a little old-fashioned, so '*No, you may not*' is quite unusual.

Modal Verbs to Offer Help

Can, May

'**Can**' and '**may**' can also be used to offer help. '**May**' is used in more formal situations:

- **Can I** help you carry those bags? - *Yes, please.*
- **Can I** get you a drink? - *No, thank you.*
- **May I** take your coat? - *Of course.*

Shall

Sometimes we can use '**shall**' to see if someone wants you to do something. This modal verb is not typical for US English:

- *That backpack looks heavy. **Shall I** carry it for you? (Do you want me to?)*
- Yes, please.
- **Shall I** open the window? (Do you want me to?)
- *Good idea, it's too hot in here.*

Let's summarize:

Modal Verbs: Permission **Review**

Asking for permission

may

May I ask a question?



could

Could I sit here?



can

Can I use your pencil?



more formal

less formal

Giving permission

may

You may borrow my car if you are careful.



can

You can borrow this shirt.



more formal

less formal

Saying someone has permission

may

Students may borrow books for 14 days.



can

Students can use the computers at any time.



Watch this short video from American English to see how the verbs 'can', 'may' and 'could' can be used to ask and give permission:

See also:

[Modal Verbs: Overview](#)

[Modal Verbs for Possibility](#)

[Modal Verbs for Ability](#)