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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*

## Giving permission

**may**

You may borrow my car if you are careful.



**can**

You can borrow this shirt.



*less formal*

## Saying someone has permission

**may**

Students may borrow books for 14 days.



**can**

Students can use the computers at any time.



*less formal*

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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](#)