

Lesson 9. Mastering the verbs 4

Modal verbs

Mastering means having full command; that's much more than just knowing.

In this lesson, we'll take a look at the modal verbs.

As with the verb tenses we have studied in the previous lessons, you might think that modal verbs are a subject that should already be known by upper intermediate students (if it's your case). However, this is not always true. Many students have trouble dealing with modal verbs. That's why it's important for you to go over this subject. If you think you already know everything there is to know about modal verbs, please concentrate on pronunciation.

The Modal verbs

What are modal verbs?

Modal verbs are a type of auxiliary verbs that change “the mode” (that's the origin of the word “modal”) of other verbs.

For example, if I say:

- I **play** football every Saturday.

I can change the “mode” of the verb “to play” by placing a modal verb right before it.

- I **must** play football every Saturday.

By adding, “must” to the verb “play”, I get a different meaning. In this case, I am indicating that “playing football every Saturday” is an obligation.

How many modal verbs are there?

There are about 10 modal verbs, but grammarians usually add other verbs to the list below because they're studied alongside with them. We'll talk about these later.

1. **Can-** *poder-* Example: I **can** do it. *Lo puedo hacer.*
2. **Could-** *pude, podría* Example. I **could** do it. *Lo pude/podría hacer.* **Note:** exact meaning will be given by the context.
3. **Might-** *puede que, quizás, a lo mejor.* Example: He **might** come. *Puede que él venga.*

4. **May**- *puede que*. It **may** rain.
5. **Will**- to form the future tenses. Endings *-rá- ré* in Spanish. Example: I **will** see it. *Lo veré*. **Note:** The negative form of will is “**will not**”, but it’s usually expressed as “**won’t**”
6. **Would**- to form the conditional. Endings *-ría* in Spanish. Example: I **would** do it. *Yo lo haría*.
7. **Must** – *debo*. Example: I **must** work. *Yo debo trabajar*.
8. **Should**- *debería*- Example: You **should** come. *Tú deberías venir*.
9. **Shall**- suggestion, invitation and future. Examples (suggestion): Shall we have a break? *¿Nos tomamos un descanso?* – (Future). They shall come. *Ellos vendrán*.
10. **Ought to**- *debería*. Example: They **ought to** clean the room.

What do these verbs have in common?

- 1) They cannot be conjugated. In other words, you don’t add –s or –es for the third person, and they don’t have a future or past version except insofar as some of them come in present form. For example, “can” is in present while “could” is used in the past.
- 2) They can’t be used as infinitives, participles, imperatives or, in some cases, subjunctives.
- 3) They function as auxiliary verbs as they modify the meaning of the verbs placed next to them.
- 4) It’s not possible to put two modals verbs together. Example: You can’t say: I ~~will can~~. INCORRECT.

Semimodals and other verbs

There are other verbs that are not considered, strictly speaking, “modal verbs” but are studied together with modal verbs because they share some characteristics with them (semimodals) or because they are used to replace modal verbs.

Semimodals

1. Had better: *Más vale que*
2. Dare: *atreverse*
3. Need: *necesitar*
4. Used to: *solía, o antes hacía algo que ya no hago*.

Other verbs that are usually studied together with modal verbs

Had- Past tense of “have”. It’s studied together with “must” because it is used as its past tense

Example:

- He **must** study today. *Él debe estudiar hoy.*
- He **had** to study yesterday. *Él debió/tuvo que estudiar ayer.* **Note:** I can't say "He ~~musted~~ studied yesterday". INCORRECT.

To be able to- it is studied together with can and could, because we can't use "can" in future or past tenses.

Example:

- I **won't be able** to see you tomorrow.
- It's not possible to say: I ~~won't can~~ see you tomorrow. INCORRECT.

In the case of "could", usually the use of "be able to" in the past is optional although there is a slight difference in meaning. "Be able" means ability, or special skill to do something, like in Spanish "*ser capaz*". "Can" or "could" instead don't have this connotation.

Example of the use of "be able" and "could" for past tense

- I **would have been able** to work if he had let me. CORRECT – *Habría sido capaz de trabajar si él me hubiese dejado.*
- I **could have been able** to work if he had let me. CORRECT. *Podría haber trabajado si él me hubiese dejado.*

Structure:

- **Affirmative:** Subject + modal verb+ main verb + object. Example: We **can** work harder.
- **Negative:** Subject + modal verb+ **not** + main verb + object. Example: She **wouldn't** do something like that.
- **Question:** Modal verb+ subject + main verb + object? Example: **Could** they go home?
- **Negative question:** Modal verb + not + subject + main verb + object? Example: **Won't** he come?
- **Answers:** Yes, + subject + modal verb- No, +modal verb +not. Example: Yes, I can- No, I can't.

Example "Modal verb" audiobook chapter 6: He **can't** marry just anyone.

IMPORTANT: Do not add "to" after any of the modal verbs, except in the case of "ought TO"

Example: They **should** ~~to~~ do it. They **ought to** do it.

When are modal verbs used?

We usually use modal verbs when we want to express:

- Degrees of certainty- I think it **may** rain- *Puede que llueva*
- Ability- They **can** do many things. *Ellos pueden hacer muchas cosas*
- Possibility- We **might** come next week. *A lo mejor venimos la semana que viene.*
- **Permission- Can** I open the window? It's hot in here. *¿Puedo abrir la ventana? Hace calor aqui.* Obligation- I **must** work today. *Debo trabajar hoy.*

Past Tense of Modal verbs

The biggest challenge you'll have with modal verbs is to know how to use them in the past tense.

As it is complicated to remember many rules, it is better to learn the equivalence between the Spanish structure and the English structure of modal verbs in the past.

How to use the modal verbs in the past

I have included a list of sentences using modal verbs in past tenses and their equivalent in Spanish.

Note: We'll go over some of these structures when we study the conditionals.

Past structures with modal verbs and the equivalent Spanish tenses

Spanish	Affirmative	Spanish	Negative
<i>Pudimos hacerlo</i>	We could do it	<i>No pudimos hacerlo</i>	We couldn't do it.
<i>Podríamos haberlo hecho</i>	We could have done it.	<i>No podríamos haberlo hecho.</i>	We couldn't have done it.
<i>Debimos(tuvimos que) hacerlo</i>	We had to do it.	<i>No debimos hacerlo</i>	We mustn't have done it. Note: We hadn't do it is not possible. We didn't have

			to do, doesn't express the same idea.
<i>Deberíamos haberlo hecho</i>	- We should have done it - We ought to have done it.	<i>No deberíamos haberlo hecho</i>	- We shouldn't have done it. - We ought not to have done it. Note: Contractions are not common with "ought to".
<i>Deberíamos haberlo hecho si hubiéramos tenido tiempo</i>	We should have done if we had had (some) time.	<i>No deberíamos haberlo hecho de haber tenido tiempo.</i>	We shouldn't have done it if we had had time.
<i>Puede que lo hayamos hecho</i>	We may have done it	<i>Puede que no lo hayamos hecho</i>	We may not have done it. Note: Contractions are not common with "may".
<i>A lo mejor lo hicimos</i>	We might have done it.	<i>A lo mejor no lo hicimos</i>	We might not have done it. Note: Contractions are not common with "might".

Remember:

- The simple past tense of "must" is "had".
- The simple past tense of "can" is "could".
- To express a past action with the rest of the modals we have to resort to the structure "**subject + modal verb + have + past participle of the main verb + object.**"
- Whenever we use "haberlo + past participle of the main verb" in Spanish, in English the structure is "have+ past participle of the main verb". Therefore, "haberlo" = "have".

Contraction of the past forms of the modal verbs

When speaking, native speakers make contractions of the past forms of the modal verbs that are difficult to understand if your ear is not properly trained.

When listening to English, pay attention to these sounds, and try to repeat them aloud.

- He could have done it- He **could've** done it- sounds something like this: /hi **kudaf** donit/
- He should have done it- He **should've** done it- sounds something like this: /hi **shudaf** donit/
- He would have done it- He **would've** done it- sounds something like this: /hi **wudaf** donit"/
- He must have done it- He **must've** done it- sounds something like this: /hi **mastaf** donit/

Working with the audiobook with modals

Please, go to chapter 6 of your audiobook and listen to it at least two times then read it.

As you'll see, I have highlighted the modal verbs in **pink**.

Chapter 6

Wedding plans

"I hope that Dorian Gray makes this girl his wife, passionately adores her for six months and then suddenly becomes fascinated by someone else."

"I imagine you have heard the news, Basil?" Said Lord Henry to Hallward one night in a small private room at the Bristol.

"No Harry" replied the artist "what is it about?"

"Dorian Gray is getting married" said Lord Henry.

"Dorian is getting married!" He exclaimed. "Impossible!"

"It's absolutely true."

"Who to?"

"To an unknown actress."

"I can't believe it. Dorian is rich and has good social standing. He **can't** marry just anyone."

"If you tell him that, he is sure to marry her, Basil."

"I hope she is a nice girl, Harry."

"The girl is beautiful" murmured Lord Henry. "Dorian says that she is beautiful and he doesn't tend to be wrong about such matters."

"Are you serious?"

"Completely serious, Basil."

"But do you approve of it, Henry?" Asked the painter. "You **can't** possibly approve. It's just a silly infatuation."

"I never approve, or disapprove, of anything now. Dorian Gray falls in love with a beautiful young woman who plays Juliet and proposes to her. I hope that Dorian Gray makes this girl his wife, passionately adores her for six months and then suddenly becomes fascinated by someone else. He **would** make a marvellous study."

"I don't believe a word you say, Harry."

Lord Henry started to laugh.

"I believe everything I have said. But here comes Dorian. He **can** tell you more than me."

"My dear Basil, my dear Harry, you **must** congratulate me!" Said the young man. "I have never been so happy."

He was excited and seemed extraordinarily handsome.

"I hope you will always be happy, Dorian" said Hallward "but I **won't** forgive you for not telling me about your engagement."

"And I **won't** forgive you for arriving late for dinner" interrupted Lord Henry, putting his hand on the young man's back and smiling as he talked. "Let's sit and you **will** explain to us how it all happened."

"Really there's not much to tell" said Dorian, as they sat around the small, round table. "After I left Harry yesterday evening, I dressed, had dinner in a small Italian restaurant and at eight o'clock went down to the theatre. When the performance finished I went to speak to her. While we were sitting next to each other, I saw in her eyes a look I had never seen before. We kissed. Her whole body shook. Later she knelt and kissed my

hands. Of course our engagement is a secret. She still hasn't told her mother."

"At what point did you propose to her? How did she reply?" Asked Lord Henry.

"I told her that I loved her and she told me that she wasn't worthy of being my wife. That she wasn't worthy! We'll go to the theatre. When you see Sibyl you **will** understand me."

He got up and put on his coats. The painter was silent and worried. A short while later, they went out. He led them to the theatre as they had planned. When the horse and carriage stopped at the door Basil felt he had aged several years.

Listen and repeat aloud the following sentences.

Remember: If you know the meaning of these sentences well, this is an excellent opportunity to improve your pronunciation using modal verbs as you needn't be worried about the structure.

Spanish	English	Phonetics	Approximate Pronunciation
Él no se puede casarse con cualquiera	He can't marry just anyone.	hi kɑːnt ˈmæri dʒəst ˈeniwʌn	Hi kant méri chast éniwuan
Él haría un maravilloso(tema de) estudio	He would make a marvellous study	hi wʊd ˈmeɪk ə ˈmɑːvləs ˈstʌdi	Hi wud méik a marvles sstadi
Él le puede contar más que yo	He can tell you more than me	hi kən tel ju mɔː ðən miː 	Hi kan tel iu mor dan mi
¡(Ustedes) Deben felicitar-me!	You must congratulate me!"	ju məst kən ˈgrætʃʊl eɪt miː	Iu mast kongráyuleit mi
pero no le perdonaré por no haberme informado de su compromiso.	but I won't forgive you for not telling me about your engagement.	bət ˈaɪ wəʊnt fə ˈgɪv ju fə nɒt ˈtelɪŋ miː ə ˈbʌt jər ɪn ˈgeɪdʒmə nt	Bat ái wuónt for ˈgɪv ii for not télin mi ábaut ior éngueichment
Y yo no le perdonaré por llegar tarde a cenar	And I won't forgive you for arriving late for dinner	ənd ˈaɪ wəʊnt fə ˈgɪv ju fər ə ˈraɪvɪŋ leɪt fə ˈdɪnə 	And ái wuónt fo ˈgɪv iu for áraiving léit for díner
Cuando vean a	When you see	wen ju ˈsiː	Wuén iu si sibel iu

Sibyl, (ustedes) me comprenderán	Sibyl you will understand me.	¹ sɪbl̩, ju wɪ, ˌʌndəˈstænd d miː	wuil andérstand mi
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As there are not too many examples of modal verbs in chapter 6, I have gone over the previous chapters to check for examples of the use of modal verbs.

Here you have sentences in the modal verbs that can be found in chapter 3.

Listen and repeat the following sentences aloud.

Spanish	English	Phonetics	Approximate Pronunciation
Si él se parece a su madre debería ser muy guapo.	If he looks like his mother he should be very handsome.	ɪf hi lʊks ˈlaɪk ɪz ˈmʌðə hi ʃəd bi ˈveri ˈhænsəm	If hi luks láik his máder hi shud bi véri hansom
Él (la) habrá heredado.	He will have inherited it.	hi wɪ, həv ɪn ˈherɪtɪd ɪt 	Hi wuil hav inhéritidit
Ella podría haber elegido a cualquier hombre	She could have chosen any man	ʃi kəd həv ˈtʃʊzən ˈeni mæn	Shi kud hav choussen éni man
Deberíamos interesarnos por los colores, por la belleza, por la alegría de vivir.	We should be interested in colour, in beauty and in the joy of living	wi ʃəd bi ˈɪntrestɪd ɪn ˈkʌlə ɪn ˈbjʊːti ənd ɪn ðə dʒɔɪ əv ˈlɪvɪŋ	Wui shud bi interested in bíuti and in de choi of líving
Ahora puedo mirarla usted a la cara sin sonrojarme.	Now I can look at you in the face without blushing.	naʊ ˈaɪ kən lʊk ət ju ɪn ðə feɪs wɪð ˈaʊt ˈblʌʃɪŋ	Nau ái kan lik at iu in de féis wuizáut bláshing
Me gustaría saber cómo volver a ser joven	I would like to know how to become young again	ˈaɪ wʊd ˈlaɪk tə nəʊ ˈhaʊ tə bi ˈkʌm jʌŋ ə ˈgen	Ái wud láik tu nóu háu tú bi'kam iang aguen
¡Lo haré!	I will do it!	ˈaɪ wɪ, də ɪt	Ai wuil duit
¿Promete que hablará todo el tiempo?	Do you promise you will talk the whole time?	də ju ˈprɒmɪs ju wɪ, ˈtəʊk ðə həʊl ˈtaɪm 	Du iu prómis iu wuil tok de hol táim?

To sum up:

Modal verbs are a type of auxiliary verbs that change “the mode” of other verbs. Example: I play football on Saturdays. I **CAN** play football on Saturdays. With “can” I have changed the mode of the verb “play”.

The most common **modal verbs** are: can, could, might, may, will, would, shall, must, should and ought to.

Modal verbs are used to express:

- Degrees of certainty- I think it **may** rain.
- Ability- They **can** do many things.
- Possibility- We **might** come next week.
- Permission- **Can** I open the window?
- Obligation- I **must** work today.

Past tense of the modal verbs

- Could is the past tense of Can
- Had is the past tense of Must

For the rest of the modal verbs we need the structure: Subject + modal verb +have + past participle of the main verb + object. Example: I should have done it. *Lo debería haber hecho.*

If you think you already know everything about modals, please practice pronunciation, especially of the past forms.

Homework

Translate the following sentences into English. Please, check the answers below.

Once you have corrected your mistakes, repeat the sentences aloud.

1. Puede que ellos hayan ido al cine.
2. Ellos debieron ir, pero nosotros no estamos seguros
3. No podré estar allí el domingo
4. Deberías haberla visto (una cosa)
5. Ella habría pintado la casa si hubiera tenido tiempo
6. Deberías haberla llamado.
7. Debí explicárselo a ella.

8. Yo podría haber hecho otra cosa
9. Él debe haber heredado mucho dinero
10. No pude salir de la oficina antes.

Answers:

1. They may/might have gone to the cinema.
2. They must have gone, but we are not sure.
3. I won't be able to be there on Sunday
4. You should have seen it
5. She would have painted the house if she had had time
6. You should have called her.
7. I must have explained it to her/ I had to explain it to her.
8. I could have done something else
9. He must have inherited a lot of money
10. I wasn't able to go out of the office earlier/before. I couldn't go out of the office earlier/before