**Modals – Possibility, Ability, Permission and Requests**

Modal verbs are very useful as they help form sentences with different functional meaning. However, it is quite common that one modal verb can have more than one functional meaning.

Below, we will look at the differences and common uses of the modal verbs can, could, may and might.

**Can**

Most often, ‘can’ is used to express the ability to do something:

- ‘We can deliver the item by Friday.’
- ‘We can translate any document.’
- ‘I can speak with the supplier and see if they have the fabric.’

‘Can’ is also commonly used to ask for permission or make requests:

- ‘Can I speak with you for a moment?’
- ‘Can I stop you for a moment?’
- ‘Can I leave the office one hour early on Thursday?’
- ‘Can we get the bill, please?’

Can is also often used to make suggestions:

- ‘You can take a taxi, it’ll be faster than taking the bus.’
- ‘You can go via Beijing, it’ll be quicker.’

**Could**

As the past form of can, ‘could’ is commonly used to describe an ability that you had in the past, but now do not:

- ‘I could speak Spanish when I was younger.’
- ‘I could run the 100 metres in under 11 seconds when I was at college, but after my knee injury I changed to Yoga.’
- ‘We could see he was nervous during the presentation.’

‘Could’ is often used to express permission or make a request in a more polite manner than can:

- ‘Could I take annual leave at the end of the month?’
- ‘Could you please send me the documents by Friday?’
- ‘Could I get you another drink?’

‘Could’ is also used to express possibility:

- ‘They could hire a private bus.’
- ‘To cut costs, we could open a production factory in Vietnam.’
- ‘You could use my laptop, if it’s urgent.’

May

‘May’ is used to ask for permission in a very formal manner e.g. during an interview:

- ‘May I come in?’
- ‘May I know the reason for your call?’
- ‘May I help you?’

Like ‘could’, ‘may’ is also used to express possibility:

- ‘We may open a new branch in the city centre, depending on our profits in Q3.’
- ‘They may not be able to attend the meeting.’
- ‘It may be possible to delay the launch date.’

Might

As the past form of ‘may’, ‘might’ is used to suggest possibility, however the chance is very small (less than may):

- ‘We might be able to open a new branch in the city centre, but I doubt it.’
- ‘He is very busy this week so he might not come to the meeting.’
- ‘It might be possible to delay the launch date, but I don’t think the customers would be happy.’

Tip – Further modal verbs for requesting and asking permission

We use ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘will’, and ‘would’ to ask people to do things. We use ‘can’, ‘could’, and ‘may’ to ask for permission.

The modal verbs ‘can’ and ‘will’ are more direct than ‘could’ and ‘would’.

- ‘Can/Could you help me with this report?’ (request)
- ‘Will/Would you cover for me while I have lunch?’ (request)
- ‘Can/Could/May I use your computer?’ (asking permission)