

Modals Defined: Can / Could; Will / Would; May / Might; Shall / Should

can Past tense could

1. physical or mental ability: *I can carry both suitcases. Can you remember the war?*
2. possession of a specified power, right, or privilege: *The President can veto congressional bills.*
3. possession of a specified capability or skill: *I can tune the harpsichord as well as play it.*
4. possibility or probability: *I wonder if my long lost neighbor can still be alive. Such things can and do happen.*
5. Used to indicate that which is permitted, as by conscience or feelings: *One can hardly blame you for being upset.*
6. probability or possibility under the specified circumstances: *They can hardly have intended to do that.*
7. *Usage Problem.* Used to request or grant permission: *Can I be excused?*

[Middle English first and third person singular present tense of *connen*, **to know how**, from Old English *cunnan*.]

could

1. Used to indicate ability, possibility, or permission in the past: *I could run faster then. It could be no better at that time. Only men could go to the club in those days.*
2. Used with hypothetical or conditional force: *If we could help, we would.*
3. Used to indicate tentativeness or politeness: *I could be wrong. Could you come over here?*

will Past tense would

1. Used to indicate simple futurity: *They will appear later.*
2. Used to indicate likelihood or certainty: *You will regret this.*
3. Used to indicate willingness: *Will you help me with this package?*
4. Used to indicate requirement or command: *You will report to me afterward.*
5. Used to indicate intention: *I will too if I feel like it.*
6. Used to indicate customary or habitual action: *People will talk.*
7. Used to indicate capacity or ability: *This metal will not crack under heavy pressure.*
8. Used to indicate probability or expectation: *That will be the messenger ringing.*

verb, transitive & intransitive

To wish; desire: *Do what you will. Sit here if you will.*

[Middle English *willen*, **to intend to**]

would

1. Used after a statement of desire, request, or advice: *I wish you would stay.*
2. Used to make a polite request: *Would you go with me?*

3. Used to indicate uncertainty: *It would seem to be getting warmer.*

may Past tense might

1. To be allowed or permitted to: *May I take a swim? Yes, you may.*
2. Used to indicate a certain measure of likelihood or possibility: *It may rain this afternoon.*
3. Used to express a desire or fervent wish: *Long may he live!*
4. Used to express contingency, purpose, or result in clauses introduced by *that* or *so that*: *expressing ideas so that the average person may understand.*
5. To be obliged; must. Used in statutes, deeds, and other legal documents.

[Middle English, to be able, from Old English *mæg* first and third person sing. of *magan*, **to be strong, be able**.]

might

1.
 - a. Used to indicate a condition or state contrary to fact: *She might help if she knew the truth.*
 - b. Used to indicate a possibility or probability that is weaker than *may*: *We might discover a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.*
2. Used to express possibility or probability or permission in the past: *She told him yesterday he might not go on the trip.*
3. Used to express a higher degree of deference or politeness than *may*, *ought*, or *should*: *Might I express my opinion?*

shall past tense should

1. Used before a verb in the infinitive to show:
 - a. Something that will take place or exist in the future: *We shall arrive tomorrow.*
 - b. Something, such as an order, a promise, a requirement, or an obligation: *You shall leave now. He shall answer for his misdeeds. The penalty shall not exceed two years in prison.*
 - c. The will to do something or have something take place: *I shall go out if I feel like it.*
 - d. Something that is inevitable: *That day shall come.*
2. *Archaic.*
 - a. To be able to.
 - b. To have to; must.

should

1. Used to express obligation or duty: *You should send her a note.*
2. Used to express probability or expectation: *They should arrive at noon.*
3. Used to express conditionality or contingency: *If she should fall, then so would I.*
4. Used to moderate the directness or bluntness of a statement: *I should think he would like to go.*

Modals: Usage Notes

One: Generations of grammarians and schoolteachers have insisted that *can* should be used only to express the capacity to do something, and that *may* must be used to express permission. Technically, correct usage therefore requires *The supervisor said that anyone who wants an extra day off may (not can) have one, or May (not can) I take another week to submit the application?* Only 21 percent of the Usage Panel accepts *can* in the latter sentence. But *can* has a long history of use by educated speakers to express permission, particularly in British English. What is more, the blurring of the line between *can* and *may* is socially and historically inevitable, since politeness often makes the use of *can* preferable in the “permission” sense. For example, the sentence *You can borrow my car if you like* is a more gracious offer than *You may borrow my car*; the first presumes the granting of permission, while the second makes a point of it. Still, it is understandable that insistence on the use of *may* should become a traditional schoolroom ritual, particularly in first-person requests such as *May I leave the room?* since it requires the pupil to distinguish explicitly between what is possible and what is allowed, a difference not always apparent to younger children. And even in later life, observance of the distinction is often advisable in the interests of clarity. Thus, the sentence *Students can take no more than three courses* allows the possibility that a student who is unusually capable may take more, whereas *Students may take no more than three courses* does not. The use of *can* to express permission is better tolerated in negative questions, as in *Can't I have the car tonight?* probably because the alternative contraction *mayn't* is felt to be awkward.

Two: The traditional rules for using *shall* and *will* prescribe a highly complicated pattern of use in which the meanings of the forms change according to the person of the subject. In the first person, *shall* is used to indicate simple futurity: *I shall (not will) have to buy another ticket.* In the second and third persons, the same sense of futurity is expressed by *will*: *The comet will (not shall) return in 87 years. You will (not shall) probably encounter some heavy*

seas when you round the point. The use of *will* in the first person and of *shall* in the second and third may express determination, promise, obligation, or permission, depending on the context. Thus *I will leave tomorrow* indicates that the speaker is determined to leave; *You and she shall leave tomorrow* is likely to be interpreted as a command. The sentence *You shall have your money* expresses a promise (“I will see that you get your money”), whereas *You will have your money* makes a simple prediction. Such, at least, are the traditional rules. But the distinction has never taken firm root outside of what H.W. Fowler described as “the English of the English” (as opposed to that of the Scots and Irish), and even there it has always been subject to variation. Despite the efforts of generations of American schoolteachers, the distinction is largely alien to the modern American idiom. In America *will* is used to express most of the senses reserved for *shall* in English usage, and *shall* itself is restricted to first person interrogative proposals, as in *Shall we go?* and to certain fixed expressions, such as *We shall overcome.* *Shall* is also used in formal style to express an explicit obligation, as in *Applicants shall provide a proof of residence,* though this sense is also expressed by *must* or *should.* In speech the distinction that the English signal by the choice of *shall* or *will* may be rendered by stressing the auxiliary, as in *I will leave tomorrow* (“I intend to leave”); by choosing another auxiliary, such as *must* or *have to*; or by using an adverb such as *certainly.* Many earlier American writers observed the traditional distinction between *shall* and *will*, and some continue to do so. The practice cannot be called incorrect, though it may strike American ears as somewhat mannered. But the distinction is difficult for those who do not come by it natively, and Americans who essay a *shall* in an unfamiliar context run considerable risk of getting it wrong, and so of being caught out in that most embarrassing of linguistic gaffes, the bungled Anglicism.

Three: Like the rules governing the use of *shall* and *will* on which they are based, the traditional rules governing the use of *should* and *would* are largely ignored in modern American practice. Either *should* or *would* can now be used in the first person to express conditional futurity: *If I had known that, I would* (or somewhat more formally, *should*) *have answered differently*. But in the second and third persons only *would* is used: *If he had known that, he would* (not *should*) *have answered differently*. *Would* cannot always be substituted for *should*, however. *Should* is used in all three persons in a conditional clause: *if I* (or *you* or *he*) *should decide to go*. *Should* is also used in all three persons to express duty or obligation (the equivalent of *ought to*): *I* (or *you* or *he*) *should go*. On the other hand, *would* is used to express volition or promise: *I agreed that I would do it*. Either *would* or *should* is possible as an auxiliary with *like*, *be inclined*, *be glad*, *prefer*, and related verbs: *I would* (or *should*) *like to call your attention to an oversight*. Here *would* was acceptable on all levels to a large majority of the Usage Panel in an earlier survey and is more common in American usage than *should*. *Should have* is sometimes incorrectly written *should of* by writers who have mistaken the source of the spoken contraction *should've*.

Four: In informal writing both *if* and *whether* are standard in their use to introduce a clause indicating uncertainty after a verb such as *ask*, *doubt*, *know*, *learn*, or *see*: *We shall soon learn whether* (or *if*) *it is true*. In such contexts, however, the use of *if* can sometimes create ambiguities. Depending on the intended meaning, the sentence *Let her know if she is invited* might be better paraphrased as *Let her know whether she is invited* or *If she is invited, let her know*. In conditional sentences the clause introduced by *if* may contain either a past subjunctive verb (*if I were going*) or an indicative verb (*if I am going*; *if I was going*), depending on the intended meaning. According to the traditional rule, the subjunctive should be used to describe an occurrence that is presupposed to be contrary to fact, as in *if I were ten years younger* or *if Napoleon had*

won at Waterloo. The main verb of such a sentence must then contain the modal verb *would* or (less frequently) *should*: *If America were still a British colony, we would have an anthem that human voices could sing*. *If I were the President, I should* (or *would*) *declare November 1 a national holiday*. When the situation described by the *if* clause is not presupposed to be false, however, that clause must contain an indicative verb, and the choice of verb in the main clause will depend on the intended meaning: *If Hamlet was really written by Marlowe, as many have argued, then we have underestimated Marlowe's genius*. *If Kevin was out all day, then it makes sense that he couldn't answer the phone*. Note also that the presence of the modal verb *would* in the main clause should not be taken as a sign that the verb in the *if* clause must be in the subjunctive, if the content of that clause is not presupposed to be false: *If I was* (not *were*) *to accept their offer—which I'm still considering—I would have to start the new job on May 2*. *He would always call her from the office if he was* (not *were*) *going to be late for dinner*. Again according to the traditional rule, the subjunctive is not correctly used following verbs such as *ask* or *wonder* in *if* clauses that express indirect questions, even if the content of the question is presumed to be contrary to fact: *We wondered if dinner was* (not *were*) *included in the room price*. *Some of the people we met even asked us if California was* (not *were*) *an island*. With all deference to the traditional rules governing the use of the subjunctive, it should be noted that a survey of the prose of reputable writers over the past 200 years would reveal a persistent tendency to use the indicative *was* where the traditional rule would require the subjunctive *were*. A sentence beginning *If I was the only boy in the world*, while not strictly correct, is wholly unremarkable. But the corresponding practice of using the subjunctive in place of the indicative may be labeled a hypercorrection. In spoken English there is a growing tendency to use *would have* in place of the subjunctive in contrary-to-fact clauses, as in *if I would have been the President*, but this usage is still widely considered incorrect.