

Explanations

Ability

Can and *be able to*

Can, like all modal verbs, cannot be used in an infinitive or continuous form.

We use *be able to* in situations where we need these forms.

I'd like to be able to swim.

Not being able to swim is annoying.

Certainty and uncertainty

■ *Must* and *can't*

These words have a meaning related to certainty – they are used to make deductions. This is when we are sure or almost sure about something because it is logical. This usage is especially common with the verb *be*.

You must be tired after your long journey. (I'm sure you are)

That can't be Sue. She's in Brazil. (I'm sure it's not possible)

These words are also used in other ways: *must* for obligation (see next section) and *can('t)* for ability (see above).

■ *May*, *might* and *could*

These words all express uncertainty or possibility. *Could* is not used with *not* in this context.

I might go out, I don't know. I could get wet!

The meaning for all three words is approximately 50 per cent probability. But if we stress the modal verb strongly in speech the probability is reduced.

I might see you later if I finish my work, but don't count on it.

(*might* is strongly stressed in speech)

■ *Should* and *ought to*

These words are both used for obligation (see next section).

But they also have a meaning related to certainty – they are used when we expect that something will happen.

Brenda should be home by now. (I expect that she is)

■ *Be bound to*

This is used to say that something is certain to happen in the future.

You're bound to see Paula if you go there. (I'm sure you will)

Obligation

■ *Must* and *have to*

In writing there is no real difference between these words. In speech there is sometimes a small difference. *Must* is used when the speaker personally feels something is important and *have to* is used when the situation makes something necessary.

You must start working harder! (I say so)

You have to turn left here. (it's the law)

Sorry, I must leave/have to leave now. (in this example there is no difference)

■ *Mustn't* and *don't have to*

Be careful: *must* and *have to* are very similar in their affirmative forms (see previous paragraph) but they are completely different in their negative forms.

Mustn't describes something which is prohibited. *Don't have to* describes something which is not necessary.

You mustn't leave now. (It's not allowed. It's against the rules.)

You don't have to leave now. (It's not necessary. You have a choice.)

■ *Should* and *ought to*

These words have the same meaning. They are used to say what is the best thing to do. They can be used to give an opinion, some advice, or polite instructions.

We should do something different for our holidays this year.

I think you should see a doctor.

You ought not to smoke if you're pregnant.

You should send in your application by July 18th.

■ *Had better*

This phrase gives strong advice about how to stop something going wrong. It can refer to present or future time.

I think you'd better leave now. (before it is too late)

You'd better not drive. (it might be dangerous)

■ *Is/Are to*

This is used in formal instructions. *Not* is stressed.

No-one is to leave the room.

You are not to leave the room.

Practice

1 Underline the correct word or phrase in each sentence.

- a) There's someone at the door. It can/must be the postman.
- b) Don't worry, you don't have to/mustn't pay now.
- c) I think you had better/would better take a pullover with you.
- d) Jones could/must be president if Smith has to resign.
- e) Sorry, I can't stay any longer. I have to/might go.
- f) It was 5 o'clock an hour ago. Your watch can't/mustn't be right.
- g) It's a school rule, all the pupils have to/must wear a uniform.
- h) I suppose that our team must/should win, but I'm not sure.
- i) Let's tell Diana. She could/might not know.
- j) In my opinion, the government might/should do something about this.

2 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given. You must use between two and five words, including the word given.



- a) I think you should give up smoking immediately.
had
 I think you had better give up smoking immediately.
- b) I expect we will get there by 5.00, if there isn't too much traffic.
should
 We 5.00, if there isn't too much traffic.
- c) Is it necessary for me to bring my passport?
have
 Do my passport?
- d) I am sure that the cat is in the house somewhere.
be
 The cat in the house somewhere.
- e) An aerial is not required with this radio.
have
 You don't an aerial with this radio.

- f) It is very inconvenient if you can't drive.
to
 It's very inconvenient if drive.
- g) I am sure that John is not the thief.
be
 John the thief.
- h) I am certain that Norman will be late.
bound
 Norman late.
- i) All students should report to the main hall at 9.00.
are
 All students to the main hall at 9.00.
- j) I thought that you would know better!
ought
 You better!

3 Underline the most suitable word or phrase in each sentence.

- a) We can't be lost. It isn't allowed/I don't believe it.
- b) Jane is bound to be late. She always is/She must be.
- c) Late-comers are to report to the main office. It's a good idea/It's the rule.
- d) You don't have to stay unless it's necessary/if you don't want to.
- e) Astronauts must feel afraid sometimes. They're supposed to/It's only natural.
- f) You can't come in here. It isn't allowed/I don't believe it.
- g) All motorcyclists have to wear crash helmets. It's a good idea/It's the rule.
- h) I ought not to tell Jack. It's not a good idea/It's the rule.
- i) We should be there soon. I expect so/It's absolutely certain.
- j) You'd better leave now. That's my advice/That's an order!

4 Complete each sentence so that it contains *might*, *might not*, *must*, *mustn't*, *can* or *can't*. More than one answer may be possible.

- a) Don't stand up in the boat! You might fall in the river!
- b) Sue says she's stuck in traffic and she be late.
- c) You really start spending more time on your work.
- d) Tell Peter he stay the night here if he wants to.
- e) That's a really stupid idea! You be serious, surely!
- f) You realise it, but this is very important to me.
- g) Don't be silly. You expect me to believe you!
- h) We're not sure but we go to Prague for Christmas this year.
- i) Me learn to fly! You be joking!
- j) Bill cooked the lunch, so you expect anything special!

5 Rewrite each sentence so that it contains *can, could, must, have to or should* (including negative forms).

- a) I'm sure that Helen feels really lonely.
Helen must feel really lonely.
- b) You're not allowed to park here.

- c) It would be a good idea if Harry took a holiday.

- d) I'm sure that Brenda isn't over thirty.

- e) Do I need a different driving licence for a motorbike?

- f) What would you advise me to do?

- g) Mary knows how to stand on her head.

- h) You needn't come with me if you don't want to.

- i) It's possible for anyone to break into this house!

- j) The dentist will see you soon. I don't think he'll be long.

6 Choose the most suitable description for each picture.



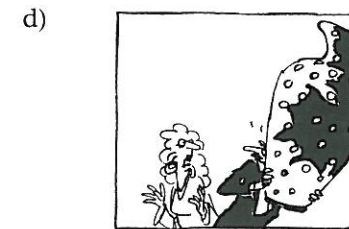
- 1) He should be exhausted!
- 2) He must be exhausted!



- 1) We mustn't pay to go in.
- 2) We don't have to pay to go in.



- 1) I'm afraid we have to operate.
- 2) I'm afraid we should operate.



- 1) Mind out, you could drop it!
- 2) Mind out! You can drop it!



- 1) Thanks, but I'd better not!
- 2) I don't have to, thanks.



- 1) We must be here for hours!
- 2) We're bound to be here for hours!

Key points

- 1 Most modal auxiliaries have more than one meaning. You should think carefully about the context, or tone of voice, to understand the meaning.
- 2 The negative forms *mustn't* and *don't have to* have different meanings.
You mustn't go. (it's against the rules)
You don't have to go. (it isn't necessary)
- 3 In normal speech *should* is a weaker obligation than *must* and *have to*.
You should go to the doctor. (I think it's a good idea)
You must go to the doctor. (it's necessary)
 But in formal speech or writing *should* can be a way of expressing a strong obligation.
Passengers for Gatwick Airport should change at Reading.

→ SEE ALSO
Grammar 17: Modal verbs: past
Grammar 20: Consolidation 4