

In the Service of Good Writing

Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda!

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Have you ever lain awake in the wee hours of the morning thinking about what you should have done, would have done, or could have done? If so, then you understand the power of modal auxiliary verbs. In English, we use the verbs *to be* and *to have* as auxiliary (helper) verbs to express the timing of actions or states of being. We also use the verb *to be* plus a past participle to express the passive voice. However, we use modal auxiliary verbs (*can, could, do, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*) to express feelings, such as beliefs, doubts, guesses, and regrets, as well as to ask questions and make requests. There are also some semimodal verbs (*dare, need, ought to, used to*) and other verbs with modal meanings (*have [got] to, be going to, and be able to*).

The modal auxiliary verbs are common words that native English speakers have been using since early childhood. As a result, native English speakers seldom give these words much thought. However, if you want to write well or even to think clearly, you need to pay careful attention to these simple yet powerful words.

Grammatical modality allows a speaker or writer to attach expressions of belief, attitude, and obligation to statements. In English class, you may have learned about the 5 basic moods of English verbs (Table 1).

The 5 basic moods of English verbs are a good starting point for the study of modality. However, writers and editors should have a deeper understanding of modality in English. Note that we do not use word endings to mark the mood of a verb in English. Sometimes, we use word order or modal auxiliaries to express grammatical mood. To express grammatical mood clearly, we sometimes have to use adverbs such as *perhaps* or expletive constructions: “It is unlikely that...”.

Realis Moods—Indicative Mood and Emphatic Modality

Linguists divide grammatical moods into 2 categories: realis and irrealis. Realis moods are used for expressing statements of fact and reality. In English, we have only one realis mood:

the indicative. However, we can also use the modal auxiliary *do* to express emphatic modality, which is also part of the indicative mood:

- I do believe in spooks, I do believe in spooks. I do, I do, I do, I do, I do believe in spooks! —The Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*.

However, *do* can be used as an auxiliary in questions (interrogative mood):

- Do you love me?

Also, we use the auxiliary *do* to negate things in the indicative mood:

- She does not smoke cigarettes.

Note also that *to do* can be an ordinary verb, not just an auxiliary:

- After supper, we did the dishes.

Irrealis Modalities

The other 4 basic moods (imperative, interrogative, conditional, and subjunctive) express irrealis modalities, which convey something other than reality. There are several irrealis modalities (Table 2).

Although we can certainly express these various irrealis modalities in English, we do not clearly mark our verbs to indicate them. Also, the way in which people express these

Table 1. Basic Moods of English Verbs

Mood	Purpose
Indicative	Expressing statements of fact and reality.
Interrogative	Asking questions.
Imperative	Making commands and requests.
Conditional	Expressing a state that would cause something else to happen.
Subjunctive	Expressing a hypothetical state or a state contrary to reality (eg, a wish, a desire, or an imaginary situation).

Table 2. Irrealis Modalities

Modality	Purpose
Epistemic	To express doubts, certainties, and guesses.
Deontic	To express how you think things ought to be.
Commissive	To express your commitment to doing something, such as a promise or a threat.
Directive	To issue commands or make requests.
Volitive	To express wishes or desires. “If only!”

modalities can be confusing, especially if they are using what sounds like an epistemic or volitive modality in order to soften a command. For example, you might say to a waiter, “Could I have...?” when you really mean, “Please bring me....” If your boss says that he or she would like you to do something, you should probably interpret that statement as a polite command, rather than as a wish.

Expressing Grammatical Modality

To express grammatical modality accurately, you must first think carefully about what you want to say. Then, you must choose the right words, such as the right modal auxiliary and perhaps some adverbs, to express yourself clearly. Notice that each modal auxiliary can be used for several different purposes, as you can see from Table 3.

Now that you have a clear understanding of grammatical modality, think about the difference between how doctors are practicing medicine (indicative mood) and how they ought to be practicing medicine (deontic modality)!

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Resources

Modal Verb Tutorial. EnglishPage.com.
www.englishpage.com/modals/modalintro.html.

Sevastopoulos J: Modals. Palo Alto, CA: Grammar-Quizzes.com.
www.grammar-quizzes.com/modalsum.html.

Table 3. English Modal Auxiliaries

Verb	Usage
<i>can</i>	You can use <i>can</i> to express ability, possibility, probability, or permission.
<i>could</i>	<i>Could</i> sometimes serves as the past tense of <i>can</i> . <i>Could</i> is also used in the past conditional (eg, he said that he would go if he could.) <i>Could</i> can also be used as an alternative to <i>can</i> to express less certainty (That could be true), or as a polite way of stating requests (I would be grateful if you could turn down the volume on your stereo).
<i>do</i>	<i>Do</i> can be used as an auxiliary to express emphasis, or as part of a question or a negation. (<i>Do</i> is not always used as an auxiliary.)
<i>may</i>	Like <i>can</i> , <i>may</i> can be used to express possibility, probability, or permission. <i>May</i> can also be used to express volition, as in prayers, imprecations, or benedictions (may peace be upon them!). <i>May</i> can be used to express purpose or expectation (I sow so that I may reap) or contingency (We'll be prepared, come what may) or concession (He may be small but he is wiry) or choice (You may cook it on the stovetop or in the microwave). In laws and legal documents, <i>may</i> is used to express that something is permitted but not required.
<i>might</i>	<i>Might</i> was originally the past tense of <i>may</i> . However, <i>might</i> can also be used to express less probability or possibility than <i>may</i> (It might be possible to get there on time), or a present condition that is contrary to fact (if you had done your homework, you might be able to pass the test). <i>Might</i> can also be used as a polite alternative to <i>may</i> (might I have this next dance?) or to <i>ought</i> or <i>should</i> (you might at least pay for the damages).
<i>must</i>	<i>Must</i> can be used to say that some action is necessary or required. <i>Must</i> can also be used to issue a command, or to express that someone should do something. <i>Must</i> can also be used to express strong likelihood (That must be Janet calling).
<i>shall</i>	<i>Shall</i> is sometimes used to express simple futurity (indicative mood). However, <i>shall</i> is often used to express a command or exhortation (thou shalt not kill). In law, it is used to express what is mandatory (Congress shall make no law ...). <i>Shall</i> can also be used to express what is inevitable or likely in the future (We shall see). It can also be used to express determination (They shall not pass!).
<i>should</i>	<i>Should</i> was originally the past tense of <i>shall</i> and is sometimes still used in that sense, such as to express futurity from a point of view in the past. <i>Should</i> is also used to express condition (if he should leave his father, his father would die). <i>Should</i> can also be used to express obligation, propriety, or expediency (you should brush your teeth after every meal). <i>Should</i> can also be used to express what is probable or expected, and to soften direct statements or requests.
<i>will</i>	<i>Will</i> is used to express the future tense in the indicative mood. <i>Will</i> is also often used to express frequent or habitual actions or natural tendencies. <i>Will</i> can be used to express desire, choice, willingness, or consent. In negative constructions (I won't!), it expresses refusal. <i>Will</i> can be used to express capacity or sufficiency (the tank will hold 40 liters). Although <i>will</i> can be used to express probability or inevitability, it can also be used to express determination, insistence, persistence, or willfulness or to make a command, exhortation, or injunction.
<i>would</i>	<i>Would</i> came from the past tense of <i>will</i> . <i>Would</i> can be used to indicate what someone said or thought about what was going to happen or be done. <i>Would</i> can also be used to talk about an imaginary situation or something that did not happen. <i>Would have</i> is used to talk about something that did not happen or was not done.