

Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful

Mini Lesson #6

Modals: Helping Verbs with Meaning

The **purpose** of this lesson is to demonstrate that **Modals** are like **Helping Verbs** with specific meanings.

As demonstrated in Mini Lessons #4 and #5, **Helping Verbs** are used with their **Main Verbs** in English **Verb Tenses**. They have several grammatical purposes or functions, but they do not add semantic meaning to the sentences in which they are used. **Modals** are Helping Verbs with one additional feature. **Modals** add semantic meaning to the sentences in which they are used. To illustrate, consider the following 3 sentences:

He **does** not **speak** English.
He **cannot** **speak** English
He **should** not **speak** English.

In these 3 sentences, **speak** is the **Main Verb**; **does**, **can** and **should** are **Helping Verbs**. If these sentences are made into questions, **does**, **can** and **should** are all inverted with the subject, to form the questions.

Does he **speak** English?
Can he **speak** English?
Should her **speak** English?

In these sentences, **does** is used to make the sentences negative or to formulate the questions. However, it adds no semantic meaning to either. If you ask: “What is the meaning of ‘**does**’ in these sentences?” The answer is: “It has no meaning.” However, the word **can** has the meaning of **ability**. The question with ‘**can**’ asks if he has the ability to speak English and in the negative sentence ‘**can**’ informs us that he does not have the ability to speak English. Similarly, the word **should** has the meaning of **importance** or **appropriateness**. In the question ‘**should**’ asks if it is appropriate or important to speak English, and in the negative sentence the word ‘**should**’ informs us that it is not important or appropriate to speak English.

English has nine commonly used **MODALS**:

will would shall should may might can could must

Unlike **Helping Verbs**, **Modals** are not used to show the kind of tense; on their own they do not show past, present or future time; and they do not change form to show agreement with their subjects. However, they are used with, and are often contracted with, **not** in negative sentences, and they are inverted with subjects to form questions. In this regard they do function like **Helping Verbs**, as shown above. Also, like **Helping Verbs**, **Modals** are used in short answers, they are used in tag questions, they are used to express agreement or disagreement, they are used in questions of surprise or doubt, and they are stressed in sentences to show emphasis.

Two other expressions are often considered to be **Modals**: **ought to** and **have to**. ‘**Ought to**’ has the same meaning as ‘**should**’ and ‘**have to**’ has the same meaning as ‘**must**’. However, their structures are slightly different from the **Modals** presented above because they both include the word ‘**to**’.

Except for the ‘to’, ‘ought’ is used like the other Modals as shown in these sentences:

He **ought to speak** English.
Ought he **to speak** English?
He **ought** not **to speak** English.

The Modal, **ought**, is like the other Modals except that it is followed by the **TO Form** of the **Main Verb**.

The **Modal have to** is different still as shown in these sentences:

He **has to speak** English.
Does he **have to speak** English?
He **doesn't have to speak** English.

The Modal **have to** is used like a **Main Verb**, requiring the **Helping Verb** ‘**DO**’ when used in questions or negative sentences.

The most difficult aspect of modals is the meanings that they convey. They are used to make polite requests, indicate ability, suggest possibilities, and offer advice to mention a few of their meanings. **Modals** provide problems for the learner because most of their meanings can be expressed by more than one modal, and each modal can be used to express more than one meaning.