

Present and future

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.

- Key points**
- 1 Most modal auxiliaries have more than one meaning. You should think 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.