Modal Verbs

Modal verbs are a special group of verbs that help express modality, which is a fancy word that means likelihood, ability, permission, request, or obligation. You use modals all the time:

“May the Force be with you!”
"Would someone get this walking carpet out of my way?"
"I can be a jedi! Ben, tell him I'm ready."
"A jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind."

The principle English modal verbs are can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would.

What Makes Modals Special

Modal verbs have three special features about them that distinguish them from the way normal verbs work.

They only have a present tense form
Unlike normal verbs that change spelling in the past tense and future tense, modal verbs do not change with the tense of a sentence.

*Normal verb in past tense: “We’ve analyzed their attack, sir, and there is a danger.”* (Past tense of analyze.)
*Modal verb in past tense: “There was nothing you could have done, Luke, had you been there.”* (Expressing likelihood or possibility in the past.)

Because modal verbs do not change their spelling when referring to modality in the past, they require a little help. Usually, have jumps in to save the day, as in the above example.

No ‘s’ added in the third person
Another quirk about modal verbs is that they don’t add an ‘s’ when used in the third person. Normal verbs do add an ‘s’ with pronouns like he, she, it, and they.

*Normal verb in the third person: “I wonder if he really cares about anything…and anyone.”*
*Modal verb in the third person: “Tell that to Jabba. At best, he may only take your ship.”*

It’s a safe rule of thumb to say that modal verbs don’t ever change, no matter what tense or person the modal verb is being used in.

Following verbs are in the infinitive
Another unique feature of modal verbs is that any verb right after them is always in the infinitive form (the form that uses “to,” as in “to search” or “to follow”). When a normal verb follows another normal verb it usually changes form to match the sentence.
Normal verb following normal verb: “This little droid. I think he is searching for his former master.”
Normal verb following modal verb: “He feared you might follow old Obi-Wan on some damn fool idealistic crusade like your father did.”

Contact
May the Force be with you! Want more help with modal verbs? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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