

Prepare for {IELTS}

Video Lessons



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GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Modal verbs

HOW TO FORM MODAL VERBS

PART 1

EXPLANATION

- There are many significant MODAL VERBS including **must, might, may, could** and **can**.
- There are also several SEMI-MODAL VERBS and forms which work as MODALS. These include **to need to, to have to, used to, to manage to, to be able to**.
- MODALS use different forms in PRESENT, PAST and FUTURE TENSES, in CONTINUOUS TENSES and in PASSIVE FORMS.
- Understanding how MODALS are formed can improve your grade for IELTS Writing and Speaking.

MODAL VERBS

This lesson focuses on how modal verbs are formed. In order to understand how they are used in much more detail, look at our lessons on:

- Ability
- Deduction and Assumption
- Obligation
- Possibility
- Suggestions and Advice

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs in the present simple tense:

- Candidates **must prepare** diligently for the IELTS examination.
- Although you **might think** this is a ridiculous suggestion, it actually makes a great deal of sense.
- Patients **may experience** a small amount of pain after the operation.
- Disabled people **could play** a far more significant role in society.
- **There must/might/may/could** be more to do.
- We **must not do** anything to exacerbate the problem.
- Many students **might/may not want** to take extra classes.
- The dilemma we face **could not be** more serious.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs in the present continuous tense:

- You **must/might/may/could be wondering** why I haven't called recently.
- The staff who have lost their jobs **must/might/may/could be feeling** quite upset at the moment.
- She **might/may/could be working** hard at the moment but, knowing her, she probably isn't.
- At this exact moment, somebody **might/may/could be doing** an experiment which will change our lives forever.
- She **must/might/may not be feeling** very well today. That would explain her reaction.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs to refer to the past:

- It **must have been** a traumatic experience for everyone concerned.
- It **might have been** better if the country had not industrialised at such a break-neck speed.
- Before The Industrial Revolution, ordinary people **may have been** happier than they are today.
- Twenty or thirty years ago, major international organisations **could have done** something to stop the exploitation of natural resources.
- **There must/might/may/could have been** more injustice in the past.
- It **must/might/may not have been** easy to emigrate years ago.
- It **could not have been** easy to emigrate years ago.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs to refer to the future and to conditions:

- It **must stop** raining soon. The forecast said it would be sunny all day.
- I **must get** to the shop before it closes this evening.
- Next week's meeting **must be cancelled**. (This is a passive form)
- They **might/may/could come** this evening. They said they would.
- The conference **might/may/could be postponed** if the weather does not improve. (This is a passive form)
- You **must not say** a word about the party. It's a surprise.
- Prices **might/may not rise** in the coming year.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs in passive forms:

- The threat **must be taken** seriously and something **must be done**.
- The situation **might be improved** if the government took steps.
- Increased levels of rainfall **may be experienced** in some regions.
- A far more significant role **could be played** by both the elderly and the young.
- Something **could surely be done** to make life easier for the elderly.
- This substance **must not be consumed** without medical supervision.
- The error **might/may not be discovered** for years.
- Whisky **could not be sold** legally in the past.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can use these verbs in passive forms in the past:

- Everybody **must have been told** to stay at home today. The office is completely empty.
- All the documents **must have been given** out before we arrived.
- German actually **might/may/could have been spoken** by more people in the past than it is today.
- I'm afraid I **might/may/could have been misunderstood** by my boss. I was trying to make a joke but she seems to have taken it seriously.
- He **must/might/may not have been told** about the meeting.
- He **could not have been told** about the meeting.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MUST, MIGHT, MAY, COULD

We can sometimes combine these verbs with other modal forms:

- We **must be able to** find solutions to the problems which confront us.
- We **might/may/could be able to** live for up to 200 years soon.
- We **might/may/could have/need to** evacuate coastal settlements.
- We **must be allowed/permitted** to express our views whenever we want to.
- We **might/may/could be entitled** to a refund.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

CAN AND COULD

We can use **can** to describe a general possibility:

- Too much exposure to sun **can cause** skin cancer.
- We **cannot accept** a situation in which corruption is rife.
- Skin cancer **can be caused** by too much exposure to sun.
- Knowledge **cannot be acquired** simply by staring at YouTube videos.

We can use **can** to describe ability:

- I **can** speak French but I **cannot** speak Dutch.
- People who **can** play musical instruments tend to be intelligent.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

CAN AND COULD

We can use **could** to describe a specific possibility:

- It **could** rain later.
- There **could** be some interesting people at the meeting.
- She **could** be quite tired. Her plane only landed two hours ago.

We can use **could** to describe ability in the past:

- When I was little I **could/couldn't** swim.
- I **could not** stand the movie any longer so I walked out.

We can use **could** in conditional sentences:

- If I **could** fly, I would be incredibly happy.
- If people **could/would** try a bit harder to be considerate, the world would be a better place.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

CAN AND COULD

We can use **cannot/can't** and **could not/couldn't** in several forms:

- I **cannot/can't** sleep properly. (ability)
- It **cannot/can't** be true. (possibility)
- You **cannot/can't** be thinking of taking that job. (possibility)
- She **cannot/can't** still be working on that essay. (possibility)
- I broke my leg so I **couldn't** come. (ability)
- My mum told me to stay at home and do my homework so I **couldn't** come to the party. (permission)

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

CAN AND COULD

We can use **cannot/can't** and **could not/couldn't** in several forms:

- She **could not/couldn't** have helped with the translations. She doesn't even speak Italian. (ability)
- He **cannot/can't** have found somewhere to live already. (possibility)
- You **could not/couldn't** have seen my mum yesterday. It's impossible! She's been in Canada for the past six months. (possibility)
- With this jacket on, you **cannot/can't** be seen. (possibility)
- We **can't/couldn't** have been seen. It was dark! (possibility)
- I don't know why he shouted at you. He **can't/couldn't** have been thinking clearly. (possibility)



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GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Modal verbs

HOW TO FORM MODAL VERBS

PART 2

EXPLANATION

- Important MODAL VERBS and SEMI-MODAL VERBS include **should, ought to, need to, have to, manage to, succeed in, used to, will** and **would**.
- MODALS use different forms in PRESENT, PAST and FUTURE TENSES, in CONTINUOUS TENSES and in PASSIVE FORMS.
- Understanding how MODALS are formed can improve your grade for IELTS Writing and Speaking.

MODAL VERBS

This lesson focuses on how modal verbs are formed. In order to understand how they are used in much more detail, look at our lessons on:

- Ability
- Deduction and Assumption
- Obligation
- Possibility
- Suggestions and Advice

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

SHOULD AND OUGHT TO

We can use **should** and **ought to** in the present simple form:

- I believe educators **should focus** on this issue as soon as possible.
- Some parents **ought to consider** the long-term consequences before sending their off-spring to specialist music and sports academies.
- There **should be / ought to be** more tolerance in the world.
- I sincerely believe that individual politicians **should not accept** bribes.
- We **ought not to be** so willing to throw away edible food.

These verbs have a present continuous form:

- You really **should be saving** up your money instead of spending it all.
- You **ought to be working** harder because your exam is next week

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

SHOULD AND OUGHT TO

These verbs are often used in a past form:

- Economists **should have realised** years ago that more investment in infrastructure was needed.
- In the past, schools **ought to have given** their pupils less homework and allowed them to have more free time.
- There **should have been / ought to have been** more time for questions.
- The government **should not have acted** so hastily/rashly.
- We **ought not to have been** so quick to criticise.
- You **should not have been listening to** my conversation.
- We **ought not to have been working** so hard last week.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

SHOULD AND OUGHT TO

These verbs are often used in a passive form:

- It **should be stated** that the use of corporal punishment is barbaric, counterproductive and immoral.
- The issue **should be focussed on** by educators.
- It **should be clearly noted** that there is no scientific evidence which actually supports the use of corporal punishment in schools.
- This problem **ought to be discussed** more widely in the media.
- The long-term consequences **ought to be considered**.
- Smoking in public places **should not be permitted**.
- It **ought not to be said** that migrants contribute less to society than so-called indigenous groups.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

SHOULD AND OUGHT TO

These verbs are often used in a past form of the passive:

- Something **should have been done** years ago to deal with the problem of unemployment in the region.
- Steps **should have been taken** twenty years ago to clean up polluted air in the city.
- Something **ought to have been done** about the high crime rate quite a long time ago.
- Children **ought to have been given** vaccinations years ago.
- Those children **should not have been told** that they were adopted until they reached the age of eighteen.
- You **ought not to have been punished**.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

NEED TO AND HAVE TO

These verbs can act as modals but work like normal verbs. This means that they agree with the subject:

- **The authorities** need/have to prevent people from drinking and driving.
- **We** need/have to tackle this problem before it gets out of control.
- **Production** needs/has to improve and **the manager** needs/has to act.
- In the end, **most of us** realise that we do not need/have to be rich to be happy.
- **Older members of society** who have retired sometimes do not need/have to worry about their income.
- **The gift** you bring for your host family does not need/have to be big.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

NEED TO AND HAVE TO

These verbs can be used in the past:

- In the past, most children **needed to work** instead of going to school.
- In the past, schoolchildren almost invariably **had to stand up** whenever a teacher entered the classroom.
- I was so pleased when he texted me and let me know that I **didn't need/have to come**.
- I got some great news. The doctor told me that **I didn't have/need to take** any more medication, and that I was/had fully recovered.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

NEED TO AND HAVE TO

These verbs can be used in the passive form:

- The problem **needs/has to be tackled** before it gets out of control.
- It **needs/has to be pointed out** that physical violence should never be accepted or tolerated.
- People **need/have to be prevented** from becoming addicted to drugs.

There is another passive form with **need to**:

- Something **needs doing**.
- Something **needed doing**.
- Something **will need doing** soon.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

NEED TO AND HAVE TO

We can use **needn't have + past participle** when somebody does something which is/was not necessary:

- Adults with excellent academic qualifications who end up working in poorly-paid jobs realise that they **needn't have worked** so hard at school.
- You **needn't have brought** an umbrella. It's always sunny here.
- You **needn't have sent** a present. We didn't expect anything.
- You **needn't have bothered** repairing that computer. We are going to throw it away.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

MANAGE TO AND SUCCEED IN

To manage to + infinitive and to succeed in + -ing act as normal verbs:

- Many adults **manage to do** two or even three different jobs.
- Some motivated individuals **succeed in achieving** all of their aims.
- Some individuals living in poverty simply **do not manage to make** ends meet, and **do not succeed in finding** a way out of their predicament.
- Most people **managed to live / succeeded in living** happily in the past.
- I **didn't manage to finish** reading the book and I also **didn't succeed in convincing** the tutor that I understood it.
- I **haven't managed to do / haven't succeeded in doing** it.
- I **will manage to finish / will succeed in finishing** before Friday.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

USED TO

We can use **used to** as a past tense:

- I **used to believe** in fairies.
- I **used to spend** most of my free time going to the theatre.
- She **used to live** just around the corner.
- She **didn't use to like / did not use to like** him.
- I **didn't use to think / did not use to think** that I was talented.
- We **didn't use to spend / did not use to spend** a lot of time using technology.
- **There used to be / There didn't use to be** a school around here.
- It **used to be believed** that courtesy was important.
- Not much **used to be known** about the planet Mars.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

WILL

We can use **will** in several structures:

- Many people in poverty **will consider** going to live in another country if the economy doesn't improve. (future simple)
- The situation **will not improve**. (future simple)
- The planet **will be destroyed** unless we change our ways. (passive)
- The situation **will not be improved** by simply increasingly spending. (passive)
- I imagine she **will be working** at the moment. (future continuous for present assumptions)
- She certainly **won't be listening** to the radio right now. (future continuous for present assumptions)

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

WILL

We can use **will** in several structures:

- This time tomorrow we **will be flying**. (future continuous)
- This time tomorrow we **will be being flown** over the city. (future continuous passive)
- We **will have/need to start** listening to the demands of the younger generation. (**will** with another modal verb)
- We **will** hopefully **be able to** make progress. (**will** with another modal verb)
- By this time tomorrow we **will have arrived**. (future perfect)
- By 2100 this city **will have been** totally **flooded**. (future perfect passive)

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

WOULD

We can use **would** in several structures:

- When younger, I **would pick** apples with my father. (habitual past)
- The vast majority of inhabitants **would leave** the region if they could find work elsewhere. (conditional)
- I **would not become** a pilot under any circumstances. (conditional)
- If I got to work late, I **would be asked** to be more punctual or **would be told** not to be late again. (conditional passive)
- If I were in your position, I **would be doing** something about it right now. (continuous conditional)
- If I had won the lottery last year, I **would be living** in Australia now. (continuous conditional)

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

WOULD

We can use **would** in several structures:

- If I were in charge, something **would be being done** about the situation. (continuous conditional passive)
- If I could afford it right now, I **would be being pampered** in a luxury spa. (continuous conditional passive)
- I **would have come** earlier if I had known you were here. (perfect conditional)
- Everything **would have been eaten** if you had come ten minutes later. (perfect conditional passive)

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

COMBINING MODALS

We can sometimes combine two modal forms:

- We **have/need to be able to** cooperate better in the future.
- We will probably not **have/need to be able to** speak foreign languages in the future.
- People **should / ought to be able to** vote at the age of sixteen.
- We **should / ought to have/need to** carry around identification at all times.
- We **should / ought to be allowed/entitled/permitted to** refuse to pay taxes for things we disagree with, such as nuclear weapons.
- I **used to have to / need to / be able to** get up really early.



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GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Modal verbs

FORMS WITH TO BE

EXPLANATION

- Some structures work as MODALS but are based on the verb **to be**. These structures are used with different tenses and usually followed by an infinitive:
 - **to be able/unable to** = ability
 - **to be allowed/permitted to** = permission
 - **to be entitled to** = permission/having the right to do something
 - **to be obliged/forced to** = obligation/necessity
 - **to be expected to** = obligation/necessity

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MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM STRUCTURES WITH TO BE

These structures are often used with the present simple tense:

- We should have a great deal of admiration for those who **are able to work** or study, and raise a family at the same time.
- Youngsters **are** often **unable to understand** more complex mathematical concepts.
- These days, thankfully, even in primary school, children **are** usually **allowed/permitted/entitled to go** to the bathroom whenever necessary.
- Companies **are obliged/expected to offer** their workers a certain amount of paid holiday each year.
- Those still at school **are not allowed/permitted/entitled to smoke**.

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MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM STRUCTURES WITH **TO BE**

These structures can be used in past tenses:

- When Mozart was just seven years old, he **was able to play** most instruments.
- In the past, anyone who **was unable to do** mental arithmetic was at a distinct disadvantage.
- In the past, many workers **were allowed/permitted/entitled to take** time off work when they wanted to celebrate religious festivals.
- As a child, I **was not allowed/permitted to eat** sweets often.
- I **used to be able to run** for hours, **but didn't use to be able to jump**.
- Passengers **used to be allowed/permitted/entitled to smoke** on public transport but **didn't use to be entitled to drink** alcohol.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM

STRUCTURES WITH TO BE

These structures can be used with perfect tenses:

- She **has been able to juggle** since she was small.
- He **hasn't been allowed to ride** his bike since the accident.
- Before I came to live in this country, I **had never been able to understand** English.

These structures can be used with **will** and **would**:

- I hope that, in the future, those aged sixteen and older **will be entitled/allowed/permitted to vote** in national elections.
- Sadly, we **will soon not be able to see** polar bears in The Arctic.
- If I had committed a crime, I **would not be entitled to stand** in elections for a period of time.

MODALS HOW TO FORM THEM STRUCTURES WITH TO BE

These structures can be used with other modal verbs:

- We **should** all **be allowed to express** ourselves.
- People **ought to be entitled to leave** school at the age of fourteen if they do not benefit from full-time education.
- Criminals **should be forced** to repay any money they have stolen.
- We **need/have to be allowed/permitted/entitled to read** whatever we want. There should be no government censorship.
- Children **must be able to make** mistakes in order to learn.
- If we decide to keep animals in zoos, they **must be allowed/permitted to move** about freely.



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PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Look at the following sentences. Each sentence contains a modal verb form. Some sentences are correct and some sentences have mistakes. The mistakes are connected to form or meaning. Decide which sentences are **correct** and which sentences are **incorrect**:

1. I believe that the government should to invest more heavily in infrastructure.
2. As a society, we have to do something quickly to avert the looming environmental crisis. Unless we take swift action, the future looks incredibly bleak.
3. We need change the law so that workers get more protection from bad employers.
4. In the past, schoolchildren had to wear a uniform. These days, schools often allow their pupils to wear whatever they want.
5. A few years ago, the government should put limits on the number of immigrants entering the country. If the authorities had done this, the current situation would be much better.
6. It should be pointed out that during the period under discussion, there was a remarkable rise in the amount of street crime reported to the police. The figure more than quadrupled.

ANSWERS

1. **INCORRECT:** When we use **should** we do not need **to**. The correct version is: **I believe that the government should invest more heavily in infrastructure.**
2. **CORRECT:** We can use **have to** to describe something which is necessary.
3. **INCORRECT:** When we use **need**, we must use **to**. The correct version is: **We need to change the law so that workers get more protection from bad employers.**
4. **CORRECT:** **Had to** is used to express the idea that something was necessary in the past.
5. **INCORRECT:** When we want to make a suggestion or give advice about the past, we need to use **should** + present perfect form. Correct version: **A few years ago, the government should have put limits on the number of immigrants entering the country. If the authorities had done this, the current situation would be much better.**
6. **CORRECT:** This is a complex and formal passive form which will impress the IELTS examiner.

PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Look at the following sentences. Each sentence contains a modal verb form. Some sentences are correct and some sentences have mistakes. The mistakes are connected to form or meaning. Decide which sentences are **correct** and which sentences are **incorrect**:

1. It ought to mention that schools have done a great deal to stamp out racist and sexist language in the classroom. If a student uses offensive words, teachers immediately challenge the person involved.
2. I believe that the government might reduce the maximum speed limit on our roads. The figure of 130kmp is far too high.
3. In the future, computers could control everything. Some scientists have expressed the fear that we are close to making computers which could actually take over the planet.
4. Humans have been fully aware for decades that our actions are causing global warming. I believe that we could have done something years ago to tackle this issue.
5. In the past, passengers on planes were allowed to smoke. Aircraft even had ash-trays next to each seat. Nowadays, those taking a flight do not have to light up a cigarette during the journey.
6. Congestion on our roads is a significant and growing problem. If governments increase the amount of tax which motorists pay, the situation must improve.

ANSWERS

1. **INCORRECT:** This structure needs to be used with a verb in the passive form. The correct version is a piece of complex language which will impress the IELTS examiner. Correct version: **It ought to be mentioned that schools have done a great deal to stamp out racist and sexist language in the classroom. If a student uses offensive words, teachers immediately challenge the person involved.**
2. **INCORRECT:** We can use **might** to describe a possibility. However, in this case we should use **must** if we want to say that this change is necessary, or **should** or **ought to** if we want to say that this change would be a very good idea. Correct version: **I believe that the government must/ought to/should reduce the maximum speed limit on our roads. The figure of 130kmp is far too high.**
3. **CORRECT:** We can use **could** to describe a future possibility
4. **CORRECT:** We can use **could** + present perfect form to describe an ability or possibility in the past.
5. **INCORRECT:** We need to use **must not** to express the idea that something is impossible because it is not allowed. We use **do not have to** to express the idea that a person has a choice. Correct version: **In the past, passengers on planes were allowed to smoke. Aircraft even had ash-trays next to each seat. Nowadays, those taking a flight must not light up a cigarette during the journey.**
6. **INCORRECT:** We use **must** to show that something is certain. In this case, we want to show that something is possible so we can use **might, may** or **could**. Correct version: **Congestion on our roads is a significant and growing problem. If**

governments increase the amount of tax which motorists pay, the situation might/may/could improve.

PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

The following sentences contain modal verbs. Try to put them into the past:

1. It must be difficult for youngsters to grow up into mature adults.
(In the past, it ...)
2. The government should invest more in infrastructure.
(In the past, the government...)
3. It might be difficult to move to another country.
(In the past, it...)
4. It may be almost impossible for poor people to get a good education.
(In the past, it...)
5. The authorities ought to stop tobacco companies from manufacturing cigarettes.
(In the past, the authorities...)

ANSWERS

1. In the past, it **must have been** difficult for youngsters to grow up into mature adults.
2. In the past, the government **should have invested** more in infrastructure.
3. In the past, it **might have been** difficult to move to another country.
4. In the past, it **may have been** almost impossible for poor people to get a good education.
5. In the past, the authorities **ought to have stopped** tobacco companies from manufacturing cigarettes.

PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

The following sentences contain modal verbs. Try to put them into the past:

1. Many people need to work more than sixty hours a week to make enough money to feed their families.
(In the past, many people...)
2. Lots of young adults have to do compulsory military service in their country's army at the age of eighteen.
(In the past, lots of young adults...)
3. Many undergraduates manage to do a part-time job whilst at university.
(In the past, many undergraduates...)
4. Rich people do not need to get a full-time job.
(In the past, rich people...)
5. Many retired people in affluent countries do not have to worry about their financial security.
(In the past, many retired people in affluent countries...)
6. Lots of us do not manage to get the balance right between our work-life and our home-life.
(In the past, lots of us...)

ANSWERS

1. In the past, many people **needed to work** more than sixty hours a week to make enough money to feed their families.
2. In the past, lots of young adults **had to do** compulsory military service in their country's army at the age of eighteen.
3. In the past, many undergraduates **managed to do** a part-time job whilst at university.
4. In the past, rich people **did not need to get** a full-time job.
5. In the past, many retired people in affluent countries **did not have to worry** about their financial security.
6. In the past, lots of us **did not manage to get** the balance right between our work-life and our home-life.