

Would

Would is originally the past tense of *will*, and it (or its contracted form *'d*) is still used in that sense: "In the 1960s, people thought we would all be driving hovercars by the year 2000."

Its more common use, however, is to convey the conditional mood, especially in counterfactual conditionals; that is, to express what *would* be the case *if* something were different: "If they wanted to do it, they would have done it by now." There is not always an explicit protasis ("if" clause) in this use: "Someone who likes red and hates yellow would probably prefer strawberries to bananas" means the same as, "If someone liked red and hated yellow, he or she would probably prefer strawberries to bananas."

Would can also be used with no modal or temporal meaning, to affect either politeness or formality of speech:

- "I would like a glass of water, please."
- "Would you be a dear and get me a glass of water?"
- "It would seem so."

All of these uses can be described as displaying *remoteness*: either remoteness of time (the past), remoteness of possibility (a conditional), or remoteness of relationship to the addressee (politeness or formality).

Shall

Shall is used in many of the same senses as *will*, though not all dialects use *shall* productively, and those that use both *shall* and *will* generally draw a distinction (though different dialects tend to draw different distinctions). In standard, perhaps old-fashioned, British English, *shall* in the first person, singular or plural, indicates mere intention, but in other persons shows an order, command or prophecy: "Cinderella, you *shall* go to the ball!" It is, therefore, impossible to make *shall* questions in these persons. *Shall we?* Makes sense, *shall you?* Does not.

Shall derives from a main verb meaning *to owe*, and in dialects that use both *shall* and *will*, the former is often used in instances where an obligation, rather than an intention, is expressed.

Should

Should is to *shall* as *would* is to *will*, except that *should* is common even in dialects where *shall* is not.

In some dialects, it is common to form the subjunctive mood by using *should*: "It is important that the law *should* be passed" (where other dialects would say, "It is important that the law be passed") or "If it *should* happen, we are prepared for it" (or "Should it happen, we are prepared for it"; where early Modern English would say, "If it happen, we are prepared for it," and many dialects of today would say, "If it happens, we are prepared for it").

Should commonly describes an *ideal* behavior or occurrence and imparts a normative meaning to the sentence; for example, "You *should* never lie" means roughly, "If you always behaved perfectly, you would never lie"; and "If this works, you *should* not feel a thing"

means roughly, "I hope this will work. If it does, you will not feel a thing." In dialects that use *shall* commonly, however, this restriction does not apply; for example, a speaker of such a dialect might say, "If I failed that test, I think I should cry," meaning the same thing as, "If I failed that test, I think I would cry."

May and might

May is used to indicate permission ("May I have a word with you?") or possibility ("That may be."), though in some dialects, the former use is often supplanted by *can* and the latter by *might* (which was originally its past tense), making this auxiliary rather uncommon in those dialects.

May is able to be used with either a present or a future sense: "I am not sure whether he is there now; he may not be, but even if he is not, he may go there later." Theoretically speaking, *might* is the corresponding past-tense form, but since some dialects use *might* quite commonly with a present or future sense, it is more common to use *may* or *might* with the perfect aspect to provide a past sense: "He might have been gone when we got there, or he might have been hiding."

May is also used to express irrelevance in spite of certain or likely truth: "He may be taller than I am, but he is certainly not stronger" may mean roughly, "While it is true that he is taller than I am, that does not make a difference, as he is certainly not stronger." (However, it may also mean, "I am not sure whether he is taller than I am, but I am sure that he is not stronger.") In many dialects, *might* is used in this sense as well.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, *might* also serves as the conditional mood of *may*: "If he were more polite, he might be better liked." Also, while there are some dialects where the use of *might* to replace *may* is very common, even in colloquial or informal speech, there are other dialects where *might* serves a more polite or formal form of *may*, just as *would* does for *will* and *could* does for *can*.

May and *might* do not have common negative contractions (equivalents to *shan't*, *won't*, *can't*, *couldn't* etc).

Can and could

Can is used to express ability (as in "I can speak English", meaning "I am able to speak English" or "I know how to speak English"), permission (as in "Can I use your phone?" meaning "Do you permit me to use your phone?"), willingness (as in "Can you pass me the cheese?" meaning "Please pass me the cheese"), or possibility ("There can be a very strong rivalry between siblings", meaning "There is sometimes a very strong rivalry between siblings"). (Some of these senses may be perceived as incorrect in some dialects; in particular, formal American English often prefers to use *may* when the sense is permission and *could* when the sense is willingness.) The negative of *can* is the single word *cannot* or the contraction *can't*.

Could has at least three distinct functions. First, it can often replace *can*, although generally it gives the phrase a conditional tone. For example, "I can help you with your work" suggests that the speaker is ready and willing to help, whereas "I could help you with your work" gives a more tentative sense of ability to help. In this sense, *could* is often used like a conditional: "I could help you if you helped yourself."

Second, *could* functions as a kind of past tense for *can*, though *could* does not function grammatically like any regular past simple verb.

Third, *could* carries the same meaning as *might* or *may* in the present. That is, *could* suggests that something is a possibility. For instance, *John is not in the office today, he could be sick.* In this phrase, *might* or *may* would carry the same meaning. Note that *can* in the negative carries the same idea as *couldn't* in this sense: "He cannot have left already; why would he want to get there so early?" Also, note that when regarding potential futures actions *could* is not equivalent to *might* or *may*. "I might go to the mall later," does not have the same connotations as "I could go to the mall later," which suggests ability more than possibility.

Must and have to

1. *Must* and "Have to" are used to express that something is imperative or obligatory ("He must leave"). According to many scholars, the difference between "must" and "have to" is found in the source of the obligation. "Must" is said to be chosen when the obligation stems from an internal source (i.e. an obligation one imposes on oneself); "have to" when the source is external (i.e. your boss, rules, the law, an authority figure, etc). Compare "I have to finish this report today" (There is a deadline, which I did not set) with "I must finish this report today" (I am imposing my own deadline).

2. Both "Must" and "Have to" are used to express a strong belief that something is the case, but makes it clear that the speaker is not stating a fact but an opinion ("It must be here somewhere"). The basis of this belief is not factual but logical. In other words, we are speculating based on what we know about the world and how it works (i.e. what has happened in the past, someone's character, etc).

Ought to and had better

Ought to and *had better* are synonymous with one of the senses of *should*: it is used to express an ideal behavior or occurrence or suggested obligation. In dialects that use *shall* commonly, *should* has a wide array of meanings, so *ought* is very common (as it is more precise), as is *ought not* (or *oughtn't*). In other dialects, *ought* may or may not be common, but *ought not* is generally quite rare: the opposite of "You ought to tell him how you feel" is generally "You should not tell him how you feel," or "You had better not tell him how you feel." There is no negative contraction for *had better*. *Had better not* is used at all times. In speech, the *had* in *had better* is generally disregarded.

Dare and need

Nowadays, *dare* and *need* are not commonly used as auxiliaries, but formerly, both were. *Dare* is especially rare in common parlance, with the notable exception of "How dare you!". "He dare not do it" is equivalent to today's "He does not/will not/would not dare to do it," while "It need not happen today" is equivalent to today's "It does not need to happen today" or "It might not happen today." However, in the sentence "I need to lose weight," *need* is not being used as an auxiliary since it can be conjugated to other forms: "I needed to lose weight," "I have been needing to lose weight," etc.

Do

As an auxiliary, *do* is essentially a "dummy"; that is, it does not generally affect the meaning. It is used to form questions and negations when no other auxiliary is present: "I don't want to do it." It is also sometimes used for emphasis: "I do understand your concern, but I do not think that will happen." Also, *do* sometimes acts as a pro-verb: "I enjoy it, I really do [enjoy it], but I am not good at it." (Other auxiliaries do this as well: "I can do it, I really can [do it], it just takes me longer"; but it bears particular note that in the case of *do*, it is often used as a pro-verb when it would be absent if the verb were present.) Because it does not affect the meaning of its verb, not all grammarians acknowledge *do* as a modal auxiliary. In a sense, it indicates a *lack* of modal auxiliary. (*Do* is also different in that it has a distinct third-person singular form, *does*, and in that its past tense, *did*, is used exactly as a past tense, not as a more general remote form).

Function

Modal verbs give additional information about the mood of the main verb that follows it. In other words, they help to incorporate or add the level of necessity: (*must* = obligation, requirement, no choice); (*should* = recommendation); (*can/could* = it is possible); and (*may/might* = option, choice).

Most modal verbs have two distinct interpretations, **epistemic** (expressing how certain the factual status of the embedded proposition is) and **deontic** (involving notions of permission and obligation). The following sentences illustrate the two uses of *must*:

- epistemic: You **must** be starving. (= "It is necessarily the case that you are starving.")
- deontic: You **must** leave now. (= "You are required to leave now.")
- ambiguous: You **must** speak Spanish.
 - epistemic = "It is surely the case that you speak Spanish (e.g., after having lived in Spain for 10 years)."
 - deontic = "It is a requirement that you speak Spanish (e.g., if you want to get a job in Spain)."

Epistemic modals can be analyzed as raising verbs, while deontic modals can be analyzed as control verbs.

List

This table lists some modal verbs with common roots in English, German and Dutch. English modal auxiliary verb provides an exhaustive list of modal verbs in English.

The words in this list are not translations of each other! Words in the same row share the same etymological root. But, because of semantic drift, words in the same row may no longer be proper translations of each other. For instance, the German verb "dürfen" is closer in meaning to the English verb "may" than to its cognate "dare".

For German and Dutch, both the plural and singular form of the verb are shown. In English, the plural and singular form are identical.

English	German	Dutch
can	können, kann	kunnen, kan
shall	sollen, soll	zullen, zal
will	wollen, will	willen, wil
must	müssen, muss	moeten, moet
may	mögen, mag	mogen, mag
dare	dürfen, darf	durven, darf

The English *could* is the past tense of *can*, *should* is the past tense of *shall* and *might* is the past tense of *may*. These verbs have acquired an independent, present tense meaning. The German form *möchten* is sometimes taught as a vocabulary word and included in the list of modal verbs, but it is actually the past subjunctive form of *mögen*.

The English verbs *dare* and *need* have both a modal use (*he dare not do it*), and a non-modal use (*he doesn't dare to do it*). The Dutch verb *durven* is not included in the list because its modal use has disappeared, but it has a non-modal use analogous with the English *dare*. Other English modal verbs include *want*, *wish*, and *hope*. All of these differ from the main modals in English (ie. most of those in the table above) in that they take the particle *to* in the infinitive, like all other English verbs (may; *to want*), and are followed by *to* when they are used as a modal (may go; want *to* go).

Properties

Germanic modal verbs are preterite-present verbs, which means that their present tense has the form of a vocalic preterite. This is the source of the vowel alternation between singular and plural in German and Dutch. Because of their preterite origins, modal verbs also lack the suffix (-s in modern English, -t in German and Dutch) that would normally mark the third person singular form:

	normal verb	modal verb
English	he works	he can
German	er arbeitet	er kann
Dutch	hij werkt	hij kan

The main verb that is modified by the modal verb is in the infinitive form and is *not* preceded by the word *to* (German: *zu*, Dutch: *te*). There are verbs that may seem somewhat similar in meaning to modal verbs (e.g. *like*, *want*), but the construction with such verbs would be different:

	normal verb	modal verb
<i>English</i>	he tries to work	he can work
<i>German</i>	er versucht zu arbeiten	er kann arbeiten
<i>Dutch</i>	hij probeert te werken	hij kan werken

In English, main verbs require the auxiliary verb *do* to form negations or questions. Modal verbs never use this auxiliary *do*:

	normal verb	modal verb
<i>affirmative</i>	he tries to work	he can work
<i>negation</i>	he doesn't try to work	he can't work
<i>question</i>	does he try to work?	can he work?
<i>negation + question</i>	doesn't he try to work?	can't he work?

Modal verbs are called defective verbs because of their incomplete conjugation: They have a narrower range of functions than ordinary verbs.