

# Modals

(obligation, necessity and permission)

**Strong obligation:** *must* and *have to*, *have got to* (informal)

present/future	must	have to	have got to
past	had to		

## 1 must

*must* is used to talk about strong obligations in the present and future that are imposed by the speaker.

*You must brush your teeth before you go to bed!*

*I must arrange to have my car fixed.*

(it is also used to talk about laws: *drivers must obey traffic signals.*)

## 2 have to / have got to

*have to* / *have got to* are used to talk about strong obligations in the present and future that are not imposed by the speaker.

*I've got to do some homework tonight. (my teacher says so)*

(if in doubt whether to use *must* or *have to*, use *have to*. Do not use *I've to* – this is wrong!)

## 3 had to

*Had to* is used to talk about past and reported obligations.

*I had to help on the farm when I was young.*

*We were told we had to get a visa before we left for Africa.*

(there are other ways to express obligation: *to make someone do something* / *to be compulsory*)

**Weak obligation:** *should* *ought to*

present / future	should do	ought to do
past	should have done	ought to have done

There is no difference in meaning between *should* and *ought to*:

*You ought to / should write home more often.*

In the past, *should have done* and *ought to have done* are often used for criticism and regret, because an action didn't happen:

*We should have bought/ought to have bought your sister a card for her birthday.*

**Asking for and giving permission:** *can* *could* *may*

*Can* is the more usual way of asking for and giving permission.

*Could* is a bit more polite.

*May* is more formal.

*Can / may / could I borrow your bike?*

*Yes, you can / may.*

Other ways of asking for and giving permission are:

*to allow someone to do*  
*to permit someone to do*  
*to let someone do*

**Prohibition:** *mustn't can't*

present / future	mustn't	can't
past	was not to	couldn't

*Mustn't* and *can't* are used when something is forbidden.

*You mustn't cross the road without looking.*  
*Elizabeth can't go out this evening – her father says so.*

Other verbs which can be used are:

*to forbid someone to do something*  
*to ban someone from doing something*  
*to not allow someone to do something*  
*to not permit someone to do something*  
*to not let someone do something*

It is also possible to use an imperative:

*Don't cycle on the pavement!*