



Modal Verbs of Probability

We can use these modal verbs (also called modals of deduction, speculation or certainty) when we want to make a guess about something. We choose the verb depending on how sure we are.

1. Talking about the present

Must / might / could / may / can't + infinitive

For example:

I am waiting for Julie with another friend, David. I ask: 'Where is Julie?'

David guesses:

- She **must** be on the bus. (I'm fairly sure this is a good guess)
- She **might** come soon. (maybe)
- She **could** be lost. (maybe)
- She **may** be in the wrong room. (maybe)
- She **can't** be at home. (I'm fairly sure this isn't true)

*Notice that the opposite of 'must' is 'can't' in this case.

Will / won't

We use will and won't when we are very sure:

- She **ll** be at work now.

Should / shouldn't

Should and shouldn't are used to make an assumption about what is probably true, if everything is as we expect:

- They **should** be there by now.
- It **shouldn't** take long to drive here.



This use of *should* isn't usually used for negative events. Instead, it's a better idea to use *will*:

- The underground **will be** very busy now (not: 'should be').

Can

Can is used for something that is generally possible, something we know sometimes happens:

- Prices *can* be high in London.

Can is not used to talk about specific possibilities:

- He *could* be on the bus (not: 'can be').

2. Using modal verbs to talk about the past:

Must / might / could / may / can't + have + past participle

- must have + past participle
- might / might not have + past participle
- could / couldn't have + past participle
- may / may not have + past participle
- can't have + past participle

For example: You: Where was Julie last night? David:

- She must have forgotten about our date.
- She might have worked late.
- She could have taken the wrong bus.
- She may have felt ill.
- She can't have stayed at home.



Will / won't + have + past participle

Will and won't / will not + have + past participle are used for past certainty (compare with present use of 'will' above):

- The parcel will have arrived before now.

Should + have + past participle

Should + have + past participle can be used to make an assumption about something that has probably happened, if everything is as we expect (compare with present use of 'should' above):

- The train should have left by now

Could

We can use could + infinitive to talk about a general possibility in the past (compare with the use of 'can' above):

- Prices could be high in the sixteenth century.

This is not used to talk about specific possibilities in the past (instead we use could + have + past participle):

- He could have been working late (not: 'could be'. As this is a specific possibility, 'could be' is present tense)