

Lesson #7

Modals: can, may and will verbs: present tense

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Modals: can, may and will

The goals of this week's Classroom lesson (#8) are to learn more about the modals may, can, will and shall. In this lesson, you will learn how to recognize and use the different forms of may, can, will and shall in the present and past tenses. You will be able to master some of the most recurrent words in the English language through the following texts, grammatical explanations, and exercises within VOA's The Classroom

WARM-UP:

Look at this English nursery rhyme:

Star light, star bright
The first star I see tonight;
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight

The words in white are modals. Modals modify the statement in a certain way. Can you tell how? Take a look at the nursery rhymes in some of the previous lessons. Can you find more examples of modals?

Let's look for more examples of modals in this VOA Learning English article on health.



Modals: can, may and will

TEXTS

The following text is an edited excerpt from a VOA Learning English article on health:

<http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/health/An-Image-Problem-for-a-Food-That-Could-Save-African-Lives-112822614.html>

An ‘Image Problem’ for a Food That Could Save African Lives

People who do not get enough vitamin A in their diet may develop night blindness. But in the developing world a lack of vitamin A causes much more serious harm to children. The World Health Organization links vitamin A deficiency to as many as two hundred fifty thousand child deaths every year.

One excellent source of vitamin A is found in sweet potatoes with orange flesh. Orange sweet potatoes contain high levels of beta-carotene, which the body changes into vitamin A. Experts say orange sweet potatoes specially bred for growing conditions in Africa could help solve the lack of vitamin A there.

But, first, more people will need to be persuaded to eat them. Jan Low with the International Potato Center, a research organization, says the sweet potato needs a better image in Africa. Ms. Low explains that sweet potatoes are mainly grown by poor women to feed their families in case another crop fails. The sweet potatoes commonly grown in Africa have white or yellow flesh. But, more importantly, they are low in vitamin A.

Dan Gustafson heads the Washington office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. He points to efforts in the past to increase the popularity of other nutritious crops. He says most of these efforts failed because organizers of the campaigns did not consider what people wanted to eat. But Mr. Gustafson sees a better chance for the efforts to increase the popularity of the orange sweet potato in Africa. For one thing, except for the color, the vegetable is similar to what people already use.

According to Dan Gustafson “it is because you have got advertising and you have got a difference that is not radical, that [...] it will work.”



Work on the Text

In order to understand how modals modify statements in which they appear, take each individual sentence from the text that contains a modal:

Are the sentences grammatically correct when you do so?

Yes, because the modal only affects the relationship between the subject and the verb. On some occasions, however, some adjustments need to be made when you take out the modal (agreement between the subject and the verb)

How does the meaning change when you switch from may to could or will?

The probability of the event occurring changes.

Are there sentences that do not contain a modal which you could rephrase using a modal?

Yes, many of them. For instance:

- *“But in the developing world a lack of vitamin A causes much more serious harm to children.”*

=> *But in the developing world a lack of vitamin A may/can cause much more serious harm to children.*

- *“One excellent source of vitamin A is found in sweet potatoes with orange flesh.”*

=> *One excellent source of vitamin A can be found in sweet potatoes with orange flesh.*

LESSON

Expression of modality: MAY, CAN, and WILL

May, can, and will are words that express modality, and are called modals. Modality is the expression of subjectivity. Any utterance or statement can be given different levels of modality according to the modal that is used.

Examples:

I swim.

no modality => neutral statement

I can swim.

modal can: the speaker (I) expresses his physical capacity to swim.

I may swim.

modal may: the speaker (I) expresses a probability on the realization of the action “I/swim” => it is likely.

I will swim.

modal will: the speaker (I) expresses a very strong probability on the realization of the action “I/swim” => it is almost certain.



LESSON (cont.)

This table reflects different conjugations and uses of the modals:

MODALS	TENSES	Present	Past
MAY		<i>May</i>	<i>Might</i>
	<i>Probability</i>	50%	20%
CAN		<i>Can</i>	<i>Could</i>
	<i>Physical capacity</i>	80%	40%
WILL		<i>Will</i>	<i>Would</i>
	<i>Probability</i>	99%	60%

Note: although it is very common among teachers of English to present **will** as an expression of the future, it is completely erroneous. It is a modal that expresses, among other things, a probability. Other modals that share the same characteristic are **may**, **might** and **would**.

It is of utmost importance that you understand that the ‘tenses’ shown in the table are not correlated to the time of the action in statements. For instance, **may** and **might** can be used in the following sentence; the only difference in meaning is that the probability of the event is greatly reduced when you use **might**:

I **may/might** go to the movies today if I have time.

When you use the past form of a modal (**might**, **could**, **would**) the probability or physical capacity that is expressed by the modal is greatly reduced from its use in the present. As a consequence, **could** and **would** are seen as being more polite in questions than their counterpart **can** and **will**:

~~Can~~ **Could** you tell me where the nearest metro is please?
~~Will~~ **Would** you lend me two dollars to buy a coffee please?

Using the modals with the negation is very easy. Just add **not** after the modal. Pay special attention to **can**, however: you may write it can’t (informal) or cannot (formal). **Will** is also quite specific: it is written won’t (informal) or will not (formal).



Exercises

1. Choose the correct modal according to the context (more than one option is possible):

- Can/could/will/would** you come and pick me up tonight? No, unfortunately. My car is at the mechanic.
- She **may/might/could** travel to Asia in the spring, but she is not sure.
- Can** you play the piano? I **can't**, but I **can** play the violin.
- What **would** you buy if you win the lottery? I **would** buy a house, but I **could** save or invest the money.
- Tomorrow we **will/may/might/can/could** go shopping. **Will/would** you come with us?

2. Find the modals that would not be appropriate in the following text:

In the U.S.A., you **can** start driving a car when you are 16 and you **can** vote when you are 18. When you are 21, you **can/may** buy and drink alcohol but watch out! The law is very strict and if you drink and drive, you **will** go to jail if the police pull you over. Most people have a designated driver when they go out. They **may/can** drink, but the designated driver **cannot/can't** drink and stays sober to drive his or her friends safely home.

3. Rephrase the following sentences using the appropriate modal:

Example: It is possible that he comes with us tonight.
=> He may / might come with us tonight.

- There is a 100% chance of rain tomorrow.
It will rain tomorrow.
- It is impossible for them to travel to New York City for the holidays.
They can't travel to New York City for the holidays.
- Please, drive carefully tonight, ok?
Would you drive carefully tonight?
- It is very unlikely that we get a loan from the bank, but it's possible.
We might not get a loan from the bank.
- I don't want to miss Eric Clapton's concert because I'm a fan.
I can't/won't miss Eric Clapton's concert because I'm a fan.

4. FINDING MODALS: Some students may say that modals are difficult to find. Yet, we can find modals in many instances throughout our daily routine. Think of when you ask someone for directions:



Hi Walter, sorry to bother you at work. Can you tell me how do I get to the beach? I'm still learning the roads in this city.



Exercises (cont.)



No problem Steve. You can go down the interstate. Or you could follow the main road out of town, but you will run into a dead end, so take the last exit if you go by interstate.



Hi Claudia! I'm going to the beach this afternoon. I just got directions. Would you like to come with me?



Hey Steve! That sounds great! But can we go after three p.m. because I am jogging right now? I will ring you when I am back at the dorm and you can pick me up. Looking forward to this afternoon! Bye!

Continue the conversation between Claudia and Steve's day trip to the beach using modals and the following situations.

Claudia asks Steve what type of food she should bring.

Can I bring lunch? Or can we stop along the way? What would you like?

On the way to the beach it starts raining. Decide what Steve and Claudia should do.

Would you like to go to a movie instead? It will be to late drive back.

We could chance it and wait until the rain stops. I think this is just a brief spring rainstorm.

Wind-down

For a VOA Student Union Blog post on the 'American Way' and the 'Can do' attitude:
<http://blogs.voanews.com/student-union/2010/11/03/the-american-way/#more-909>

Article in 'Wind down': Student Union Blog (VOA)

Picture (warm-up): Stockvault.net



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