

The World of Modal Verbs ...

possibility

(no obstacle...)
The streets are clear again, we **CAN** pass now.

capability

(have the power / knowledge for sth.)
Yes, we **CAN**!
(Obama quote) / They **CAN** play basketball very well. / I **COULD** speak Chinese when I was a kid.

option

(choice offered to you...)
You **CAN** / **MAY** / **COULD** have a salad or a dessert for the same price. You **DON'T HAVE TO** / **DON'T NEED TO** eat it if you don't like it.

choice

(you **MAKE** a choice...)
I **WOULD RATHER** not take this. I **PREFER** to stay sober when I drive. / I **PREFER** riding a bike to walking.

probability / speculation

(how likely is it? / chance of 20% / 50% / 70%?)
It **CAN** / **COULD** / **MAY** / **MIGHT** be that he has moved, I have not heard of him in a while [well] / I walked him home only the other week [hardly, not].

obligation

(inner or outer power **FORCES** you)
You **MUST** be quiet in here! (strong rule, outer force) I **MUST** try and talk to her! (inner force driving you) You **HAVE TO** / **NEED TO** wear seat belts. You **SHOULD** wear ear plugs at the concert. They **OUGHT TO** know. We **HAD BETTER** leave now.

prohibition

(forbidden!)
You **MUSTN'T** tell him! We **MUST NOT** give up now. You **CAN'T** leave before she has seen you! You **MAY NOT** speak to strangers. We **WERE NOT ALLOWED** to use our cell phones.

permission / polite request

(ask for or give/grant)
MAY I go out for a minute? – Yes, you **MAY**. / **CAN** I go out now? – Yes, you **CAN**. / **COULD** we use your bathroom, please? Yes, no problem. / **COULD** you pass me the salt, please.

suggestion

(why not this...)
We **COULD** / **CAN** go to the cinema tonight.

advice

(If I were you...)
I **WOULD** talk to her. You **SHOULD NOT** listen to him. Why don't you just ask?

deduction

(from what I see/hear/know...)
He **MUST** be at home, he just called me from his home number. The message **CAN'T** be from him, he would never say such a thing!

PAST structures:

(too late! But nice to speculate about ...)
He **MUST HAVE FALLEN** asleep! You **MIGHT HAVE PRESSED** the wrong button. You **SHOULD / COULD HAVE TOLD** me earlier. They **OUGHT TO HAVE KNOWN**. She **MAY NOT HAVE** realised her mistake. He **WOULD HAVE CALLED**, I am sure. / etc.

