GRAMMAR SUPPLEMENT

USING MODAL VERBS TO EXPRESS DEGREES OF CERTAINTY

1.1 FORM

Modal verbs follow the same pattern as "can"—also a modal verb. Affirmations, negations and questions are made the same way.

AFFIRMATIONS	NEGATIONS	QUESTIONS
I **can** meet at 3 pm.	I **can't** meet at 3 pm.	**Can** you meet at 3 pm?
She **must** be from Italy.	You **must not** smoke here.	**Must** you do that now?
Erin **might** study Biology.	Erin **might not** like it.	**Might** it be too hard?
I **could** send it to you.	I **couldn't** do that.	**Could** you send it to me?
This **may** hurt a little.	You **may not** use a phone.	**May** I take a break?

1.2 USE

Modal verbs like "must," "might," "may," "could," and "can't" are used to express degrees of certainty when speculating or deducing something about something you are seeing or experiencing. They help us show how likely we think something is, based on the information we have.

Please note that these modal verbs also have other uses that we will not consider here. Here we are focusing on their use to express degrees of certainty: How sure we are about something.

Must:

Indicates a high degree of certainty.

- The lights are on. They must be home.

Might/May/Could:

Indicate possibility, with "might" and "may" being slightly less certain than "could."

- He might be at the library.
- She could be working late.

Can't:

Indicates that something is impossible. This is a high degree of negative certainty.

- That can't be his car; he sold it last week.

1.3 Practice Exercise A

Must = very certain

Could = somewhat certain, very possible

Might/May = a bit certain, possible

Can't = very certain in a negative sense

Use the appropriate modal verb to express the indicated degree of certainty.

1. If Marta says "che", she .... be from Argentina. VERY CERTAIN
2. That .... be the right answer. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE
3. You .... have a point. POSSIBLE
4. It .... be that they missed the bus. VERY POSSIBLE
5. Luís .... be hungry because he's just eaten. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE
6. They .... not let you in. POSSIBLE
7. Look at her face. Annie .... be feeling sick. VERY CERTAIN
8. If you don't want it, your brother .... want to use it. POSSIBLE
9. It looks a bit old; it .... make you feel sick. VERY POSSIBLE
10. Sample 381 .... contain the genetic mutation. POSSIBLE

1.4 Practice Exercise B

Use the appropriate modal verb and verb to complete the sentence. There are hints to help you.

1. That .... the wrong shirt to wear to the event. POSSIBLE
2. You .... a friendlier attitude to your neighbors. VERY POSSIBLE
3. That chicken .... raw. It's still bloody! VERY CERTAIN
4. That group of people .... doing tai chi. POSSIBLE
5. A pet cheetah .... more space to run around. POSSIBLE
6. Listen to him. He .... the language fluently. VERY CERTAIN
7. This sausage .... from Chillán. The flavor is different. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE
8. It .... an AI-generated image. VERY POSSIBLE

1.5 Practice Exercise C

Use the appropriate modal verb and verb to complete the sentence.

1. It's much bigger than a dog, and it seems ferocious. It .... a wolf. I'm sure.
2. Allan is a pretty good student. He .... the answer. Ask him.
3. George .... the source of the information. He doesn't know anything about the topic.
4. My grandmother is forgetting a lot of things, and her personality seems different. She .... developing dementia.
5. You .... a big fan of Brittney Spears! You know all her songs.
6. This .... the English class. I hear them speaking French in the room.

1.6 Practice Exercise D

Transform the sentence into one that has a modal expressing degree of certainty.

Example: I'm sure they're home because the lights are on. = They must be at home because the lights are on.

1. She's not answering the phone, so maybe she's in a meeting. =

   _____.
2. He's definitely not English because he speaks with a French accent. =

   _____.
3. John is most certainly confused about this subject. =

   _____.
4. It's possible that he has left the office already. =

   _____.

ANSWER KEY

1.3   Practice Exercise A

Use the appropriate modal verb to express the indicated degree of certainty.

1.   If Marta says "che", she **must** be from Argentina. VERY CERTAIN

2.   That **can't** be the right answer. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE

3.   You **might/may** have a point. POSSIBLE

4.   It **could** be that they missed the bus. VERY POSSIBLE

5.   Luís **can't** be hungry because he's just eaten. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE

6.   They **might/may** not let you in. POSSIBLE

7.   Look at her face. Annie **must** be feeling sick. VERY CERTAIN

8.   If you don't want it, your brother **might/may** want to use it. POSSIBLE

9.   It looks a bit old; it **could** make you feel sick. VERY POSSIBLE

10.   Sample 381 **might/may** contain the genetic mutation. POSSIBLE

1.4   Practice Exercise B

Use the appropriate modal verb and verb to complete the sentence. There are hints to help you.

1.   That **might/may be** the wrong shirt to wear to the event. POSSIBLE

2.   You **could have** a friendlier attitude to your neighbors. VERY POSSIBLE

3.   That chicken **must be** raw. It's still bloody! VERY CERTAIN

4.   That group of people **might/may be** doing tai chi. POSSIBLE

5.   A pet cheetah **might/may need** more space to run around. POSSIBLE

6.   Listen to him. He **must speak** the language fluently. VERY CERTAIN

7.   This sausage **can't be** from Chillán. The flavor is different. VERY CERTAIN NEGATIVE

8.   It **could be** an AI-generated image. VERY POSSIBLE

1.5   Practice Exercise C

Use the appropriate modal verb and verb to complete the sentence.

1.   It's much bigger than a dog, and it seems ferocious. It **must be** a wolf. I'm sure.

2.   Allan is a pretty good student. He **might/may know** the answer. Ask him.

3.   George **can't be** the source of the information. He doesn't know anything about the topic.

4.   My grandmother is forgetting a lot of things, and her personality seems different. She **could be (must be)** developing dementia.

5.   You **must be** a big fan of Brittney Spears! You know all her songs.

6.   This **can't be** the English class. I hear them speaking French in the room.

1.6   Practice Exercise D

Transform the sentence into one that has a modal expressing degree of certainty.

Example: I'm sure they're home because the lights are on. = They must be at home because the lights are on.

1.   She's not answering the phone, so maybe she's in a meeting. =

She might/may be in a meeting because she's not answering the phone.

2.   He's definitely not English because he speaks with a French accent. =

He can't be English because he speaks with a French accent.

3.   John is most certainly confused about this subject. =

John must be confused about this subject.

4.   It's possible that they have left the office already. =

They might/may have left the office already.