Modals of Possibility and Certainty: 
*MAY, MIGHT, COULD, MUST / CAN'T, etc.*

A) In General

- The usual restrictions on the use of modals remain valid: They cannot be used with the will-future, they have no infinitive, no to-infinitive, no -ing form, and no past participle. Neither do the ones dealt with here, in these meanings, have a past form.
- There can only be one modal in a verb group. For the purposes of questions and negations, the modal auxiliary is “the” auxiliary.
- We may use modals of possibility and certainty to talk about the future, and sometimes *MAY, MIGHT* and *COULD* can be used indiscriminately: “It *may / might / could* rain later.”
- We may use a continuous form after all of these: “Jack *may/might/could/must/can’t* be playing squash right now.”
- For possibility and certainty in the past (may have done etc.), consult this paper.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combinations with other modals, Perfect Tenses, All uses of the -ing form, To-infinitive.</th>
<th>Paraphrases (LIKELY, POSSIBLE, PERHAPS...)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

B) MAY, MIGHT, and COULD

- *MIGHT* tends to be a bit more tentative than *MAY*, but both indicate rather probability than possibility: The speaker wishes to express that something is likely.
- *COULD* often means that something is possible but unlikely.

- **Consider:**
  - Someone's knocked the door. It *may / might* be the postman.  
    ( = Perhaps it's the postman.)
  - We *may / might* go out tomorrow night.  
    ( = Perhaps we'll go out.)
  - It *could* be true, I suppose.  
    ( = Possibly it's not a lie.)
  - You *could* win a million quid!  
    ( = It is possible for you to win that money.)

C) **MAY, MIGHT, and COULD in the Negative**

- **MIGHT not and COULD not** may be contracted, but this is never done with **MAY not** - just try it, and you will see why.
- **MIGHT not** and **MAY not** mean that it is possible that something is not the case, while **COULD not** means that something is impossible.

**Consider:**

- Dave *may not* get the job.  
  \( = \) It is possible that he won't get the job.
- We still *might not* lose the match.  
  \( = \) It's unlikely but possible for us to win.
- Jane is afraid of heights – she *could not* climb the roof.  
  \( = \) It's impossible for her...
- I'm totally unfit – I *couldn't* run a marathon.  
  \( = \) It's impossible for me...

D) **MUST and CAN'T**

- **MUST** and **CAN'T** are opposites. Both indicate certainty, but while **MUST** means that we are certain that something is true, **CAN'T** expresses our conviction that something is impossible.

**Consider:**

- She isn't answering the phone – she *must* be out.  
  \( = \) I'm certain she is out.
- You've had a long journey – you *must* be tired.  
  \( = \) I'm certain you're tired.
- Nick *can't* be in Scotland – I saw him this morning.  
  \( = \) It's impossible for him to be there.
- Life *can't* be easy if you have to spend it in a wheelchair.  
  \( = \) It's impossible for life to be easy...
E) Exercises

Fill in the gaps with the correct modal of possibility and certainty, using the verb in brackets. Sometimes, you may have to use the continuous, and some gaps permit more than one solution.

1. A: Where's Natasha? I haven't seen her all day.
   B: She **might be** (BE) in the music room. She **may be practising** (PRACTISE) for the concert tomorrow.
   A: No, she **can't be** (BE) – we'd hear her, wouldn't we?
   B: Well, so she **must be** (BE) at the conservatory already.
   A: Yeah, I guess.

2. I'm not sure, but it _________________ (RAIN) later on.

3. What are you saying? You _________________ (BE) serious about that!

4. It _________________ (BE) wonderful to be gliding down to earth on a parachute.

5. Dave _________________ (WORK) as a taxi driver – he can't drive.

6. Dan just _________________ (WIN) the match – he's really good at chess.

7. Jenny _________________ (BE) in the office – I can't reach her at home.

8. A: What are you doing tonight?
   B: I'm not sure, but I _________________ (GO) to the cinema with Jim.

9. How can you work with that noise? If I were you, I _________________ (CONCENTRATE) like this!

10. We'll have to get more glasses for the party – we _________________ (HAVE) enough.

11. We _________________ (GO) to Egypt in summer, but we're not sure yet.

12. Don't just drop by tomorrow, but call beforehand – I _________________ (BE) in.

13. What did you do that for? You _________________ (BE) out of your mind!