

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.