

Modals of Possibility

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Grammar Notes

A. Introduction to Modals

Modals (also known as modal verbs) are words that come before the main verb. They give the verb an extra meaning, such as *ability*, *advice*, or *possibility*.

Modals are always followed by a **base verb**.

A base verb is a verb with no ending (-s, -ed, -ing, etc.) added to it.

Look at the following chart to see examples of different types of modals.

Modals	Type	Example
can/could	ability	I can speak three languages.
should	advice	You should study more often.
must	necessity	He must apply for the job by Friday.
might/could/may	possibility	She might go to the movies tonight.

Grammar Notes cont.

B. Modals of Possibility

Modals of possibility show that something is **possible now**.
They can also show that something **might happen in the future**.

Modals of possibility include *might*, *could*, and *may*.
These modals all have the meaning of "possible" and "maybe."
Might and *could* are very common. *May* is more formal and not used as often.

	Positive Sentences	Negative Sentences	Questions
might	✓ Alia might go to the party.	✓ Alia might not go to the party.	✗ (not common)
could	✓ Juan could be late.	✗ (not common)	✓ Could Juan be late?
may	✓ They may buy a new car.	✓ They may not buy a new car.	✗ (not common)

Note #1

Could not is almost always used to show past ability, not present or future possibility.

- Lisa **could not** go to the party.
(Past ability = She didn't go to the party.)
- Lisa **might not** go to the party.
(Future possibility = She's not sure if she will go to the party or not.)

Note #2

The adverb *maybe* is often used to show possibility. We usually use *maybe* at the beginning or end of a sentence. Compare the adverb *maybe* with the modal *may*.

- **Maybe** he is sick today.
- He **may** be sick today.
- **Maybe** they have a cat.
- They **may** have a cat.

Exercise 1

FILL IN THE BLANKS

Write *might*, *could*, or *may* in the sentences below to show possibility.
More than one answer might be possible.

Ex. Mina _____ *might* _____ help me with my homework.

1. John and Amy _____ get a new kitten.
2. I _____ study Japanese next year.
3. Pavel _____ try out for hockey next year.
4. Daniel _____ not go to school because he's sick.
5. _____ she be our new teacher?
6. We _____ try this new restaurant tonight.
7. Louise and Pierre _____ get married in the spring.
8. _____ that be our bus?
9. They _____ not be ready to take the test.
10. Isabella _____ not join the basketball team this year.

Exercise 2

OUR TRIP

Imagine that you and your partner are taking a trip together soon. Decide where you want to go. Then write down one or two possible plans for each day using modals of possibility.

Example

Destination: Paris


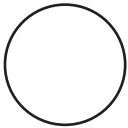
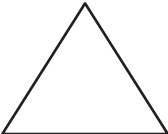
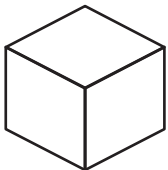
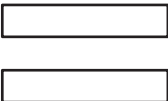
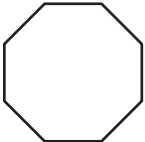
Monday: We might go to the Eiffel Tower if it's sunny.
If it rains, we could go to the Louvre and see the Mona Lisa.

Destination	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

Exercise 3

WHAT COULD IT BE?

Look at the images. With a partner, come up with some guesses about what each image might be. Use *might*, *could*, or *may* in each sentence.

#	Image	What could this be?
Ex		<i>It could be an envelope.</i> <i>It might be a wide-screen TV.</i>
1		<hr/> <hr/>
2		<hr/> <hr/>
3		<hr/> <hr/>
4		<hr/> <hr/>
5		<hr/> <hr/>

Exercise 4

GUESSING GAME

Close your eyes. You have one minute to draw a picture with your eyes closed. When you are finished, get into groups of four. Each group member must use a modal of possibility to make a guess about what you drew.

Example

Nicolas: Here's my picture. What could it be?

Hye Jin: Well, it could be a snake.

Anya: Or it might be spaghetti.

Akiko: Could it be a river?

Nicolas: Anya is right. It's spaghetti!

Exercise 5

MY POSSIBLE FUTURE

What are your possible future plans and goals? Check all that could apply to you, and think of two more things to add to the list. Then find a partner and talk about future possibilities using *might*, *could*, or *may*.

- ☐ graduate
- ☐ get a new job
- ☐ get married
- ☐ have children
- ☐ get a new pet
- ☐ buy a new home
- ☐ start a new hobby
- ☐ make new friends
- ☐ become fluent in English
- ☐ learn another language besides English
- ☐ travel
- ☐ retire
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Exercise 6

QUIZ

Find one error in each sentence.

Ex. She might coming to the concert with us.

She might come to the concert with us.

1. If I finish my assignment, I go could home early.

2. Hiro might calls you tomorrow.

3. My teacher could not give us homework to do this weekend. We'll find out on Friday.

4. May that be a UFO?

5. He might gets a new puppy.

6. We could not go out tonight. We haven't decided yet.

7. They may moving to another city next year.

8. Fatima might takes a year off school to travel around the world.

9. My children maybe absent from school tomorrow.

10. Francisco isn't in class today. May he be sick?

Answer Key

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students learn to use *might*, *could*, and *may* in affirmative sentences, negative sentences, and questions. Students guess at each other's drawings and discuss future travel and life plans.

LEVEL: Int

TIME: 2 hours

TAGS: modals, modals of possibility, might, could, may, maybe, possible, modal verbs, auxiliary verbs, verbs, grammar

Exercise 1

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. might / could / may | 6. might / could / may |
| 2. might / could / may | 7. might / could / may |
| 3. might / could / may | 8. Could |
| 4. might / may | 9. might / may |
| 5. Could | 10. might / may |

Exercise 2

Answers will vary.

Exercise 3

Answers will vary. Possible answers:

- It could be a plate. / It might be the moon.
- It might be a pyramid. / It could be a hat.
- It might be a die. / It may be a box.
- It could be a ladder. / It might be a pair of skis.
- It might be a stop sign. / It could be a picture frame.

Exercise 4

Answers will vary.

Exercise 5

Answers will vary. Encourage conversation by getting students to ask each other some follow-up questions. You could also try setting a time limit. (E.g., *You must talk to each other for at least ten minutes during this exercise.*)

Exercise 6

Answers may vary.

- If I finish my assignment, I **could go** home early.
- Hiro might **call** you tomorrow.
- My teacher **might/may** not give us homework to do this weekend. We'll find out on Friday.
- Could** that be a UFO?
- He might **get** a new puppy.
- We **might/may** not go out tonight. We haven't decided yet.
- They may **move** to another city next year.
- Fatima might **take** a year off school to travel around the world.
- My children **may be** absent from school tomorrow.
- Francisco isn't in class today. **Could** he be sick?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This lesson shows the common North American usage of modals of possibility. Variations may occur in other English-speaking countries.