

## English grammar rules

# Modal verbs can, may, must, have to

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## CAN

### Form

Positive statement: *I can go, You can go, He can go*

Negative statement: *I cannot speak (I can't speak)*

Question: *Can you come?*

Negative question: *Can he not walk? (Can't he walk?)*

The past tense is *could*.

### Use

1. **Can** is used to describe the ability to do something.  
*I can swim very well.*  
*Can he speak English fluently? - No, he can't.*  
*We cannot sing at all!*
2. It expresses the possibility to do something.  
*We can go to the seaside at last. Our holidays start next week.*
3. We use it to say that something is probable.  
*It can be John. He has blond hair and he is wearing glasses.*
4. It expresses the permission to do something.  
*Why not? You can marry her. She is a nice girl.*

## MAY

### Form

Positive statement: *I may go, You may go, He may go*

Negative statement: *He may not speak*

Question: *May I help?*

Negative question: *May he not walk?*

### Use

1. **May** is used for permissions.  
*You may borrow my car. I won't need it.*  
*May I smoke here? - No, you can't, I'm sorry.*
2. It is used to express probability or prediction.  
*They may call tomorrow. I hope so.*

The main difference between *may* and *can* is in style. *May* is more formal than *can*. *Can* is typical of spoken English.

3. The opposite of *may* is *must not* or *may not*.  
*May I smoke here?*  
*You mustn't smoke here.* (strong prohibition)  
*You may not smoke here.* (more polite, very formal)  
*You can't smoke here.* (informal spoken English)

# MUST

## Form

Positive statement: *I must be, You must be, He must be*

Negative statement: *He must not speak (He mustn't speak)*

Question: *Must he help?*

Negative question: *Must he not walk? (Mustn't he walk?)*

## Use

1. **Must** is used for strong obligations. It is personal, because it shows the speaker's opinion or will.

*I must clean my teeth. I want to be healthy.*

*You must go there. And do it right now!*

2. It expresses strong recommendation.

*You must see it. It's the best film I've ever seen.*

3. We use it to express certainty of the speaker.

*They must be at school by now. It's already 9 o'clock.*

4. The opposite of *must* is *need not*.

*I must wash up. - No, you needn't. I've already done it.*

5. *Must not* has a different meaning. It is used to express prohibition that involves the speaker's will.

*We mustn't come late today. Or the teacher will be very angry.*

*He mustn't enter this room. It is dangerous.*

# Have to

## Form

Positive statement: *I have to be, You have to be, He has to be*

Negative statement: *I do not have to speak, He does not have to speak (I don't have to speak, He doesn't have to speak)*

Question: *Do I have to help? Does he have to help?*

Negative question: *Do I not have to walk? Does he not have to walk? (Don't I have to walk? Doesn't he have to walk?)*

## Use

While *must* is used to show the speaker's opinion or will, *have to* expresses an external obligation based on a rule or on the authority of another person. It is impersonal.

Compare:

*Sarah, you must wear a coat today. It's cold.*

(Sarah's mum wants her to wear a coat. It's her personal will.)

*British students have to wear uniforms.*

(This obligation expresses a general rule. It's impersonal.)

Similarly:

*I must tidy my room.*

(The speaker's will. In this case your own will. You want to clean your room.)

*Mum says you have to tidy your room first.*

(This sentence expresses the authority of another person. It's your mum's order.)

## Notes

1. Sometimes the difference between *must* and *have to* is not important. But *have to* is more common.

*I must go home. I have to go home.*

2. We usually use *have to* in questions:  
*Mum, do I have to help you with the housework?*

3. *Must* has a present form only. In all other tenses we use *have to*.  
*We had to get up early yesterday.*  
*I've never had to borrow money.*

4. *Don't have to* and *mustn't* have a completely different meaning.  
*Don't have to* means that something is not necessary.  
*You don't have to get up early tomorrow. It's Saturday.*

*Mustn't* means that you cannot do something.  
*You mustn't eat so much chocolate.*

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