

Unit 4: Modal verbs and their substitutes

(Ersatzformen)

1. What are modal verbs/ modal auxiliaries?

Words like **can / may / must / need** and their negative forms **can't / may not / mustn't / needn't** are modal verbs (modal auxiliaries, modale Hilfsverben). We use them to express an **ability** (Fähigkeit), **permission** (Erlaubnis) or **obligation** (Verpflichtung).

These modal verbs can **only** be used in the **simple present tense**. They have no –s in the third person singular and don't need "to" to form the infinitive.

2. Modal auxiliaries in the past or future (Modalformen und ihre Ersatzformen)

If you want to use modal verbs in the past or future, you have to use their substitutes.

	Simple present	Simple past	Will future
ability, inability (Fähigkeit, Unfähigkeit)	can / can't am / is / are able to am not / is not / are not able to	could / couldn't was / were able to wasn't / weren't able to	--- will be able to won't be able to
permission, forbidding (Erlaubnis, Verbot)	can / may can't / may not / must not am / is / are allowed to am not / is not / are not allowed to	--- --- was / were allowed to wasn't / weren't allowed to	--- --- will be allowed to won't be allowed to
obligation (Verpflichtung)	must / needn't have to doesn't have to	--- had to didn't have to	--- will have to won't have to

3. Differences between *must* and *have to*

I **must** do my homework now.

personal conviction that it is necessary – **you** think that it is important that you do your homework (**inneres Bedürfnis**)

I **have to** do my homework now.

orders of a third person: **your parents** told you to do your homework (**äußerer Zwang**)

Be careful:

she mustn't = she is not allowed to (nicht dürfen)!

*She **mustn't** play with her friends today because she has to learn maths. (Her parents told her that she has to stay home and learn maths!)*

she needn't = she doesn't have to (nicht müssen / brauchen)

*She **needn't** learn maths today because she did it yesterday.*

= *She **doesn't have to** learn maths today.*



Exercises: 1. Must, mustn't or needn't? Fill in the right words.

Sarah: We _____ leave for the train station yet. It's only seven o'clock.

Kim: Yes, but we _____ forget the tickets.

Sarah: You _____ worry, I've already got them in my bag. My bag is very big, so you _____ bring one yourself.

Kim: Thank you, that's great. I'm happy that I _____ carry too much luggage (= Gepäck).

Sarah: You are welcome. But don't worry, we _____ walk far because we can take the bus from the train station to the hotel.

Kim: That's fine, but we _____ forget the bag on the bus! Do you have a map? We _____ go the wrong way!

Sarah: Stop worrying all the time. Let's think about what we can do in London. We _____ visit the Tower, it's world famous. But we _____ go to the Dungeon because I've been to the one in Hamburg.

Kim: Look! Hurry! It's 7:30. We _____ be late.



Exercise 2: Use substitute forms to change the following sentences.

Present	→ past	→future
<i>Can he dance?</i>	<i>Was he able to dance?</i>	<i>Will he be able to dance?</i>
<i>We can do what we want.</i>	<i>We were allowed to do what we wanted.</i>	<i>We will be allowed to do what we want.</i>
He can speak French.		
May I go home now?		
I must go home.		
You needn't bring a present.		
You mustn't wear shorts when you go to the opera.		
Can I help you?		

 **TEST your language skills on modals: What was Sarah's mum allowed to do when she was a child?**

Test 6

What is missing in these sentences? Put in the right substitute of the modal if you use the simple past.

Sarah: _____ I go and see the new Mad Max film?

Mum: No, you _____. You're too young.

Sarah: Oh, but that isn't fair. I _____ do anything.

Mum: You're lucky. When I was your age, I (**mustn't**) _____ go out in the evening at all.

Mum: And I (**must**) _____ work every day after school.

Sarah: But you said you enjoyed it. You helped grandpa on the farm. And you (**may**) _____ ride the horses.

Mum: Yes, that was nice. Your grandpa taught me to ride horses almost as soon as I (**can**) _____ walk. Mum: But I (**must**) _____ clean out the stables and look after the horses. It was a lot of work.

Sarah: Yes, but you (needn't) _____ do homework for two hours every evening.

Mum: That's true. We didn't have as much homework but our subjects weren't as interesting. We didn't learn any languages so I (cannot) _____ speak German until I went to college and I've never learnt French.

Sarah: But you're lucky. German is so difficult. And you (needn't) _____ do Technology.

Mum: You mean we (cannot) _____ do Technology. We all wanted to learn about computers but the school didn't have any because they were very expensive.

Sarah: Did they have electricity when you were young then?

Mum: Ha ha very funny. We always (must) _____ be nice to our parents.

Sarah: Well, did you always listen to your parents then?

Mum: Of course, I did.

Grandpa (walking into the room): No, she did not. Your mother (cannot) _____ understand the word 'no'.

Mum: Ah yes, but that wasn't fair. My brothers (may) _____ do everything.

Sarah: Yes, Mum. That's what I said. It just isn't fair, is it?

Solutions



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Sarah: We needn't leave for the train station yet. It's only seven o' clock.

Kim: Yes, but we mustn't forget the tickets.

Sarah: You needn't worry, I've already got them in my bag. My bag is very big, so you needn't bring one yourself.

Kim: Thank you, that's great. I'm happy that I needn't carry too much luggage (= Gepäck).

Sarah: You are welcome. But don't worry, we needn't walk far because we can take the bus from the train station to the hotel.

Kim: That's fine, but we mustn't forget the bag on the bus! Do you have a map? We mustn't go the wrong way!

Sarah: Stop worrying all the time. Let's think about what we can do in London. We must visit the Tower, it's world famous. But we needn't go to the Dungeon because I've been to the one in Hamburg.

Kim: Look! Hurry! It's 7:30. We mustn't be late.



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Present	→ past	→future
Can he dance?	Was he able to dance?	Will he be able to dance?
We can do what we want.	We were allowed to do what we wanted.	We will be allowed to do what we want.
He can speak French.	<i>He was able to speak French.</i>	<i>He will be able to speak French.</i>
May he go home?	<i>Was he allowed to go home?</i>	<i>Will he be allowed to go home?</i>
I must go home.	<i>I had to go home.</i>	<i>I will have to go home.</i>
You needn't bring a present.	<i>You didn't have to bring a present.</i>	<i>You will not have to bring a present.</i>
You mustn't wear shorts when you go to the opera.	<i>You were not allowed to wear shorts when you went to the opera.</i>	<i>You will not be allowed wear shorts when you go to the opera.</i>
He can't come to my party.	<i>He couldn't / was not able to come to my party.</i>	<i>He will not be able to come to my party.</i>

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