

English grammar

Modal verbs can, may, must, have to

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.
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.