

Expressing possibility, probability and certainty



Possibility

The following modal verbs are used to express possibility:

- MAY (NOT)
- MIGHT (NOT)
- COULD



Use:

a) We use may, could and might to say that it's possible something is true, happens, will happen, but we don't know:

The photocopier isn't working – there may be some paper stuck inside.

b) Use could to emphasize that there are other possibilities in addition to the one you are mentioning:

Bjorn could arrive some time this afternoon. (or this evening, or tomorrow)



c) Use might to emphasize that the opposite is also possible:

I might go to the party. (or might not)

d) Use may, might, could + well easily to say something is a strong possibility:

The weather may well improve by the weekend. I'd better write down otherwise I could easily forget.

e) Use may, might, could+ possibly/conceivably or just might to say something is a remote possibility :

*My boss could conceivably change her mind and decide to given me a pay rise.
I just might have time to finish that report this week.*



Other words and phrases to express possibility

- It's (just about) possible that + sentence:

It's just about possible that we'll have finished the project by the end of March.

- There's a/some/a slight/little possibility that + sentence:

There is a slight possibility that the whole project will be abandoned.

- It's quite/very possible that + sentence:

It's quite possible that our clients will like the new product.

- There's a strong/serious/good possibility that+ sentence:

There's a big possibility that our offices are going to be moved to the outskirts.



Probability

We use should to say that we expect something is or will be true:

You've got such a good level of English that you should have no difficulty in landing the job.

Other words and phrases used to express probability:

- Very/quite/highly likely+ inf → *He's not likely to make the same mistake again.*
- There's little/some/very/a strong likelihood of + verb + - ing/noun → *I'd say there's a strong likelihood of him getting a first class degree.*
- There's little/some/every/a strong likelihood that + sentence → *There's a little likelihood that we'll manage to meet our deadline.*



Certainty

MUST, CAN'T, COULDN'T – are used to express things you feel certain about because you have evidence:

They must be making a lot of money with so many customers. He didn't know what we were talking about so he can't have read our letter.

Other words and phrase used to express certainty:

- Bound +inf → *Their machine are notoriously unreliable and they are bound to break down before long.*



Notes on modal verbs

1. To express things happening NOW, or in PROGRESS, or arranged for the FUTURE use a continuous form: may, might/must + be doing → *You must be wondering why I have called this meeting.*
2. We also use the continuous with modals of possibility (may, might, could) in contrast to the simple form to express a weaker possibility → *We might be going out later. (weaker possibility)*
3. To talk about things in the PAST use may, might, must + have + past participle (done, been, eaten...) → *You must have been very tired after your trip.*
4. To talk about actions which took place over a period of time in the PAST use may, might, must...+have been doing → *She wasn't in when I called – she may have been doing the shopping, I suppose.*

Source: Guy Brook-Hart, Simon Haines, CAE, Student's Book

