
SIMPLE AND PHRASAL MODALS

Modals can be divided into two categories: simple and phrasal. Simple modals are the most familiar—*can*, *would*, *must*—while phrasal modals (also known as periphrastic modals) are phrases formed with the verbs *be* or *have*. Some examples of phrasal modals are *have (got) to* or *be allowed to*. While simple modals and phrasal modals share similar meanings and are used in similar ways, they are not exact equivalents. As a result, it is important to teach the two forms and help learners distinguish between them.

In this week’s Teacher’s Corner, students work together to rewrite sentences that use either simple or phrasal modals. This activity is a great way to draw attention to modals, to their different forms, and to how those different forms can create slight differences in meanings.

LEVEL

Intermediate and up (some awareness of modal forms required)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Writing

GOALS

During this activity, students will be able to:

- Distinguish between simple modals and phrasal modals
- Identify a phrasal modal that is similar in meaning to a simple modal
- Rewrite sentences using a simple modal or a phrasal modal while keeping a similar meaning

MATERIALS

- Paper and pencils/pens
 - Two sets of sentences (see Appendix A and Appendix B)
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PREPARATION

- Make enough copies of each sentence set (Appendix A and Appendix B) for half of your students.
- Pair students according to level; assign a more advanced student to work with a less advanced student.
- Write the following lists on the board:

Simple Modals

Can, May, Must, Should, Will

Phrasal Modals

Have (got) to, Be able to, Be supposed to, Be allowed to, Be going to

- **Note:** In the phrase “has got to,” the word “got” can be included or omitted, i.e., “She has to wash dishes” or “She has got to wash dishes.”

ACTIVITY PART ONE: DEFINING AND MATCHING MODALS

1. Start class by arranging students into the pairs you organized before class.
2. Turn their attention to the modals written on the board. Point to the two types of modals. Explain that simple modals are single words while phrasal modals are phrases using the verbs *be* or *have*. Tell learners that the simple modals on the board can be matched to a phrasal modal. The two modals do not mean exactly the same thing, but they can be used in similar ways.
3. After you explain the modal categories, tell students that with their partners they will identify the meanings of the simple modals listed and match them with phrasal modals that have the closest meanings.
 - a. Have students write down the lists of modals from the board, using pencil and paper.
 - b. Tell students to first review the list of simple modals and discuss with their partner the meaning of each simple modal.

- c. As they discuss the meaning of a simple modal, tell them to notice what words they use to define the simple modal. These words can give clues to which phrasal modal might be the best match.
 - d. The students then use their definitions to match each simple modal to a phrasal modal.
4. After students define and match all simple modals to phrasal modals, assign each pair of students to compare their answers with another pair of students.
 5. Check in with the whole class to ensure that everyone has the same answers or to give them a chance to ensure that their answers are correct. The matching pairs are *can/be able to*; *may/be allowed to*; *must/have (got) to*; *shall/be supposed to*; *will/be going to*.

ACTIVITY PART TWO: USING MODALS IN SENTENCES

1. Have students return to working with their original partners.
2. Hand out the first sentence set (Appendix A) to half of the pairs and the second sentence set (Appendix B) to the other pairs.
3. Tell the students to work with their partners to complete the sentences with the correct modal from the list of modals on the sheet.
 - a. **Note:** The students should only fill in the sentences at the top of the sheet. The bottom half of the sheet will be filled in later.
4. Once the pairs finish, tell them to trade their sentence set with the group they worked with earlier.
5. Explain that they must rewrite the sentences using the modal from their sheet that most closely matches. For example, the pair that worked on the worksheet with simple modals will rewrite the other group's sentences using the appropriate simple modal.
6. When the pairs finish, have them return the worksheets to the original group. Ask them to compare their original sentences with the rewrites.

7. When everyone has reviewed their answers, ask each pair to choose one of their rewritten sentences and write it on the board. When this is done, all of the sentences from the worksheets should be on the board. The students can double-check their work and use this time to ask questions.

VARIATIONS

One way to vary this activity is to utilize a reading that you have previously used in class. Modify half of the reading to use simple modals and the other half of the reading to use only phrasal modals. Students will be familiar with the material and vocabulary, making it easier for them to focus on examining the differences in meaning between the two types of modals.

EXTENSIONS

An extension to this activity could have students writing their own sentences using simple or phrasal modals as they choose. Giving learners an opportunity to create new sentences gives them a greater stake in the meanings that they want to communicate, and they may find it easier to understand the differences in how each modal is used.

APPENDIX A

Sentence Set One

Simple Modals

Can	May	Must	Should	Will
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1. We _____ go to the party if we have enough time.

2. Zahra and Fatima _____ arrive early if they want to ride to the party with us.

3. You _____ have two cookies now, but no more. You'll eat cake and sweets at the party.

4. They _____ come home by ten, but they might come home a little later.

5. Don _____ be at the party tonight. We can talk about it then.

Rewritten sentences

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

APPENDIX B

Sentence Set Two

Phrasal Modals

Be able to Be allowed to Have (got) to Be supposed to Be going to

1. They _____ go to the swimming pool on Saturday.

2. Niu _____ swim. He learned while studying in Australia.

3. David and Michelle _____ be at the pool by 10:00 am.

4. Since we know the lifeguard, we _____ go into the pool early.

5. Everyone _____ wear water shoes while swimming at the public pool.

Rewritten sentences

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Answer Key (for teachers)

Appendix A:

1. can
2. must
3. may
4. should
5. will

Appendix B:

1. are going to
2. is able to
3. are supposed to
4. are allowed to
5. has (got) to