Modal Verbs of Probability and Deduction

We can use these modal verbs (also called modals of deduction, speculation or certainty) when we want to make a guess about something. We choose the verb depending on how sure we are.

must / might / could / may / can't

- **must** + infinitive
- **might** / **might not** + infinitive
- **could** / **could not** + infinitive
- **may** / **may not** + infinitive
- **can't** + infinitive

For example:

I am waiting for Julie with another friend, David.
I ask: 'Where is Julie?'
David guesses:

- She **must** be on the bus. (I'm fairly sure this is a good guess)
- She **might** come soon. (maybe)
- She **could** be lost. (maybe)
- She **may** be in the wrong room. (maybe)
- She **can't** be at home. (I'm fairly sure this isn't true)

Notice that the opposite of **'must'** is **'can't'** in this case.

Will / won't

We use **will** and **won't** when we are very sure:

- She'll be at work now.

Should / shouldn't

Should and **shouldn't** are used to make an assumption about what is probably true, if everything is as we expect:

- They should be there by now.
- It shouldn't take long to drive here.

This use of **should** isn't usually used for negative events. Instead, it's a better idea to use **will**:

- The underground will be very busy now (not: 'should be').

Can

Can is used for something that is generally possible, something we know sometimes happens:

- Prices can be high in London.

Can is not used to talk about specific possibilities:

- He could be on the bus (not: 'can be').

PRACTICE

1. Rewrite these sentences using a modal verb of deduction.

E.g. I'm sure Amy likes animals very much

Amy must like animals very much. She's always had them around her.

- I'm sure she doesn't like children very much

- I'm sure James is a famous actor

- Perhaps she has a farm

- I'm sure she didn't work very hard at school

- Perhaps James has won an Oscar

- I'm sure she had a lot of friends when she was young

- He probably didn't want her to marry Gerald

- He probably wanted her to marry someone famous

- I'm sure they are not very close to each other

- Perhaps she gets on better with her mother2