



learning target

Aim of this section is to learn how to use modal verbs.

German	English
Ich muss nach Hause gehen.	I <i>must</i> go home.
Er sollte das Buch lesen.	He <i>should</i> read the book.
Wir können das Visum bekommen.	We <i>can</i> get the visa.

rules

What are modal verbs?

Modal verbs are a special group of verbs.
 They usually never occur alone in a sentence but with a main verb.
 Without the main verb the sentence mostly doesn't make sense.

example:

Ich **kann** (I can)

You wonder "What can I?" The sentence is incomplete and doesn't make sense but as soon as you add the main verb you know what the speaker wants to say.

Ich **kann sprechen**. (I can speak.)

"Kann" is the modal verb and "sprechen" is the main verb in this sentence.
 Together they express what the speaker is able to do.

Which modal verbs do exist?

The 6 modal verbs are:

- dürfen (may / be allowed to)
- können (can / be able to)
- mögen (like)
- müssen (must / have to)
- sollen (should / be supposed to)
- wollen (want)

How do you conjugate the verbs in a sentence with modal verb and main verb?

- conjugate the modal verb
- DON'T conjugate the main verb (keep it in the infinite form)



example:

- **Ich kann sprechen.** (I can speak.)
- **Du kannst sprechen.** (You can speak.)
- **Er/Sie/Es kann sprechen.** (He/She/It can speak.)
- **Wir können sprechen.** (We can speak.)
- **Ihr könnt sprechen.** (You can speak.)
- **Sie können sprechen.** (They can speak.)

We talked already about how to conjugate the modal verbs in the section "Konjugation der Verben". They belong to group C and don't follow a regular pattern and thus have to learn by heart.

Infinitiv	ich	du	er / sie / es	wir	ihr	sie	Englisch
dürfen	darf	darfst	darf	dürfen	dürft	dürfen	may / be allow to
können	kann	kannst	kann	können	könnt	können	can / be able to
mögen	mag	magst	mag	mögen	mögt	mögen	like
müssen	muss	musst	muss	müssen	müsst	müssen	must / have to
sollen	soll	sollst	soll	sollen	sollt	sollen	should / be supposed to
wollen	will	willst	will	wollen	wollt	wollen	want

What's the word order for sentences with modal verbs?

- put the modal verb after the subject in statements
- put the main verb at the very end of the sentence

examples:

- **Cathy kann ein wenig Deutsch *sprechen*.** (Cathy speaks a bit German.)
- **Ich möchte dich am Samstag im Cafe *treffen*.** (I'd like to meet you on Saturday in the cafe.)
- **Wir müssen noch eine Menge *lernen*.** (We still must learn a lot.)

What happens when the sentence consists a modal verb and a separable main verb?

As you can remember separable verbs have to splitted up and the prefix goes at the end of the sentence:

- **Ich *hole* ihn *ab*.** (I pick him up.)
- **Ich *sehe* oft *fern*.** (I often watch tv.)
- **Ich *bringe* euch das Buch *vorbei*.** (I bring along the book to you.)

In sentences with modal verbs, however, separable verbs AREN'T splitted up and remain one unit and go at the very end of the sentence.



examples:

- Ich **kann** ihn **abholen**. (I can pick him up.)
- Ich **möchte** oft **fernsehen**. (I'd like often to watch tv.)
- Ich **muss** euch das Buch **vorbringen**. (I must bring along the book to you.)

Understand the meaning of the modal verbs

Finally, I'd like to explain every single modal verb and give some further hints.
That's not really grammar but should help to avoid some common mistakes.

modal verb: dürfen

"Dürfen" is used to give or ask for permission:

examples:

- **Darf** ich das **Fenster öffnen**? (May I open the window?)
- Sie **darf** das **Land nicht verlassen**. (She is not allowed to leave the country.)

modal verb: können

"Können" expresses that somebody is able to do something or not:

examples:

- Sie **können** sehr gut **schwimmen**. (They can swim very well.)
- Ich **kann** morgen **nicht ins Cafe kommen**. (I can't come to cafe tomorrow.)

modal verb: mögen

"Mögen" expresses if somebody likes something or not:

examples:

- Ich **mag** sie. (I like her.)
- Sie **mag** Raimond **nicht**. (She doesn't like Raimond.)

watch out

Don't mix "mögen" and "möchten"!

- mögen means "to like" somebody or something
- möchten means "would like" something

"Möchten" is also a kind of an modal verb and thus behaves like one.

That means you just conjugate "möchten" and the main verb remains in the infinitive form.
The only difference is that "möchten" is a regular verb and is thus easy to conjugate.



Infinitiv	ich	du	er / sie / es	wir	ihr	sie	Englisch
möchten	möchte	möchtest	möchte	möchten	möchtet	möchten	would like

examples:

- Ich **möchte** dich wiedersehen. (I would like to see you again.)
- Wir **möchten** heute nicht lernen. (We don't want to study German today.)

modal verb: müssen

"Müssen" is used to express that somebody must do something:

examples:

- Du **musst** Deutsch lernen! (You must learn German!)
- **Muss** ich das machen? (Do I have to do this?)

The negation of "müssen", however, is very often source of confusion for many Germans.

"Müssen" means "must" but "nicht müssen" DOESN'T mean "must not"!

If you say "Du musst nicht" you mean "you need not". With "nicht müssen" you express that something is not necessary.

If you say "Du darfst nicht" you mean "you must not". With "nicht dürfen" you express that somebody is not allowed to do something.

examples:

- Du **musst** nicht zum Cafe kommen... . (You need not come to the cafe - we can meet tomorrow too.)
- Du **darfst** nicht zum Cafe kommen... ! (You must not come to the cafe - there are dangerous guys!)

modal verb: sollen

"Sollen" is used to give an advice or to express the own opinion

examples:

- Du **solltest** mehr lernen. (You should learn more.)
- Wir **sollten** das nicht machen. (We shouldn't do this.)



modal verb: wollen

"Wollen" is used to express that somebody really wants something.

examples:

- **Ich will jetzt gehen!** (I want to go now!)
- **Sie will ihn nicht mehr.** (She doesn't want him anymore.)

watch out

You can translate "wollen" with "want" but be careful with using it.

"Wollen" sounds in German demanding and often impolite. You'd better use "möchten" if you want something.

examples:

- **Ich möchte etwas zu trinken.** (I would like something to drink.)
- **Möchten Sie sich setzen?** (Do you want to sit down?)