

**Learn Real English**

# **Modal Verbs**

**Bonus  
pronunciation  
guide**

**Alex Markham**

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# Modal Verbs

## Bonus Pronunciation Guide

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This bonus document provides additional information to supplement the book *Learn Real English: Modal Verbs*. It can also be used as a standalone document for help in how to correctly pronounce modal verbs and semi-modals and to use different stresses for different situations

All the examples in this document have an associated audio recording which can be found by going to:

<http://www.theenglishbureau.com/modal-verb-audios/>

Or you can click on the audio icon next to each example.

An **AUDIO 01** icon is shown against each example to show that it has an associated audio track available to listen to.

The audio recordings are in standard British English

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## 1. How we pronounce modal verbs

Modal verbs are pronounced in one of two ways; strong or weak. The pronunciation used usually depends on the meaning you want to give.

### Strong form



Strong pronunciation is required when you want to stress the modal verb for questions and for effect or emphasis. The modal will be pronounced clearly and fully:

John: **Can** you speak French? Adam: Yes I **can** speak French

[AUDIO\\_01](#)

Often, we will respond to a question without repeating the main verb and just using the strong pronunciation.

Person A: **Can** you speak French? Person B: Yes I **can**

[AUDIO\\_02](#)

### Weak form



In everyday speech we usually use a weakened form of pronunciation for modal verbs. This means we pronounce the modal verb softly, fast and with a reduced or non-existent vowel

sound. At best the vowel is reduced to a *schwa* sound but it can often be omitted entirely. The schwa is a phonetic sound like a short **e** or **er** [AUDIO 03](#) The symbol for the schwa is **ə** which we'll use in this this paper to show the correct pronunciation.

## 2. Examples of modal verb pronunciations

Most modal verbs have a strong and a weak form. However, *may* and *might* have no weak form.

Here are examples of each modal verb and some semi-modals with typical pronunciations:

Modal	Meaning	Audio
I <b>can</b> see a fox	<i>Strong form: emphasis, maybe with some surprise</i>	<a href="#">AUDIO 04</a>
I <b>c'n</b> see a fox	<i>Weak form: a simple statement of fact</i>	<a href="#">AUDIO 05</a>
I <b>cən</b> see a fox	<i>Weak form: a simple statement of fact</i>	<a href="#">AUDIO 06</a>
We <b>could</b> go to the theatre tonight	<i>Strong form: we have the ability and possibility</i>	<a href="#">AUDIO 07</a>
We <b>c'd</b> go to the theatre tonight	<i>Weak form: a suggestion</i>	<a href="#">AUDIO 08</a>

We <b>must</b> think again	Weak form: We <b>m's'</b> think again	<a href="#">AUDIO 09</a>
I <b>will</b> come later	Weak form: I <b>w'l</b> come later	<a href="#">AUDIO 10</a>
I <b>will</b> come later	Very weak form: I <b>w'</b> come later	<a href="#">AUDIO 11</a>
I <b>would</b> go if I had some money	I <b>w'd</b> go if I had some money	<a href="#">AUDIO 12</a>
	I <b>w'</b> go if I had some money	<a href="#">AUDIO 13</a>
We <b>should</b> go home now	We <b>sh'd</b> go home now	<a href="#">AUDIO 14</a>
I <b>shall</b> see the film later	I <b>sh'l</b> see the film later	<a href="#">AUDIO 15</a>
	I <b>sh'</b> see the film later	<a href="#">AUDIO 16</a>

I **shəɪ** see the film later

**AUDIO 17**

### 3. Pronouncing the final consonant on modal verbs

The final consonant of the modal verb is also sometimes omitted in the weak form, especially if the verb which follows it begins with another consonant. This can make it difficult for even very advanced learners of English to pick up the modal verb being used.

For example:

*We could go to the theatre* becomes *we c' go to the theatre* **AUDIO 18**

*We shall see you later* becomes *we sh' see you later* **AUDIO 19**

### 4. Pronouncing modal verbs with 'to'

The preposition *to* is often pronounced using the schwa sound, ə, for the vowel 'o'. The schwa is a very common sound in English and it sounds like a short e sound. This schwa sound is used for all modals which use *to*.

I'm **able tə** see you now **AUDIO 20**

I'd like **tə be able tə** see the match later **AUDIO 21**

I **have tə** leave now **AUDIO 22**

We **ought tə** go back to look again **AUDIO 23**

I **used tə** play football **AUDIO 24**

The spoken pronunciation of modal verbs *ought to* and *have to* is often **oughtə** and **haftə**.

For example:

We really **oughtə** leave soon as it's getting late **AUDIO 25**

You **haftə** complete this form and send it to the office **AUDIO 26**

## 5. Pronunciation of used to

*Used* is a main verb and an adjective as well as a semi-modal in *used to*. The main verb *used*, meaning employed, may also appear with a *to-infinitive*, for example; *bricks are **used to** build houses*. The context generally makes it obvious that we are talking about *used* as a main verb or an adjective and not *used to* as a semi-modal verb which describes past habits.

In speech we show this difference by using a different pronunciation for the final *d* consonant depending on whether *used* is a main verb or adjective or a as a semi-modal.

For *used to* as a semi-modal verb we pronounce the final *d* consonant as a *t*. It therefore sounds like *uset to*. For *used* as a past of the main verb or as an adjective we we pronounce the final *d* as a *d*. For example:

Main verb (with final *d* sound): I **used** bricks to build my house [AUDIO\\_27](#)

Adjective (with final *d* sound): Bricks are **used to** build houses [AUDIO\\_28](#)

Semi-modal (with final *t* sound): I **used to** build houses with bricks [AUDIO\\_29](#)

## 6. Pronouncing Modal Contractions

Most modal verbs forming negatives in combination with *not* form contractions in speech and informal language.

I <b>can't</b> leave now, it's just getting going	<a href="#">AUDIO_30</a>
We <b>couldn't</b> repair it. It was too old	<a href="#">AUDIO_31</a>
I <b>mightn't</b> come. I have a lot to do at home	<a href="#">AUDIO_32</a>
You <b>mustn't</b> do that. It's dangerous	<a href="#">AUDIO_33</a>
You <b>oughtn't</b> to think like that, you should think positively	<a href="#">AUDIO_34</a>
I <b>shan't</b> be coming tonight, I have to wash my hair	<a href="#">AUDIO_35</a>
You <b>shouldn't</b> leave it open, the dog might escape	<a href="#">AUDIO_36</a>
You <b>won't</b> pass if you don't study	<a href="#">AUDIO_37</a>
It <b>wouldn't</b> work although I tried everything	<a href="#">AUDIO_38</a>

Some modals have contracted forms in their non-negative form:

<b>Shall</b>	I <b>'ll</b> see you later	<b>AUDIO_39</b>
<b>Will</b>	You <b>'ll</b> have a lovely time	<b>AUDIO_40</b>
<b>Would</b>	We <b>'d</b> go if we had time	<b>AUDIO_41</b>
<b>Had better</b>	We <b>'d</b> better try harder next time	<b>AUDIO_42</b>

**Real English** Native speakers often drop the contracted 'd in speech.

*You'd better check the car* becomes **you' better check the car**.

*I'd better go now* becomes, **I' better go now**. **AUDIO\_43**

## 7. Using Stress

Using stress with modals is a common method on spoken English to ensure we have made the meaning clear. It's almost impossible to list all the examples where this is used so the following examples give an indication.

For example, *might* is used to express possibility and disapproval. Putting a clear stress on *might* provides a clear distinction for your listener.

You <i>might</i> try harder	<i>No stress: it's possible that you will try harder</i>	<b>AUDIO_44</b>
You <b>MIGHT</b> try harder	<i>Stress on might: I wish you would try harder (disapproval)</i>	<b>AUDIO_45</b>
They might've spoken to him	<i>It's possible they spoke to him (I'm not sure) Note the contraction</i>	<b>AUDIO_46</b>
They <b>MIGHT</b> have spoken to him	<i>I wish they had spoken to him (disapproval) Note, no contraction</i>	<b>AUDIO_47</b>

**Real English** Some native speakers will express different degrees of probability and possibility not just by using different modal verbs but also by using stress on different parts of the sentence depending on the possibility and the emphasis you want to impart.

They <b>MAY</b> come next week	<i>Stress on may: It's possible that they will come and, if so, it will be next week</i>	<b>AUDIO_48</b>
They may come <b>NEXT</b> week	<i>Stress on next: It's possibly next week that they will come (instead of this week)</i>	<b>AUDIO_49</b>



We also differentiate meaning by either using or not using contractions. For example the difference between the future use of *will* and using *will* for *habitual actions* is often made using a stress on *will* and using a contraction. For example:

She <b>WILL</b> go there	<i>An annoying or disappointing habitual action where she keeps going there</i>	AUDIO_50
She'll go there	<i>A promise or offer that she will go there</i>	AUDIO_51

We show different levels of possibility through an elongated stress of the modal verb which shows a lower level possibility.

I <i>might</i> go to the pub later	No stress on might: A statement of possibility	AUDIO_52
I <b><i>mi-ight</i></b> go to the pub later. I'm not sure	Elongated stress on might: A low level of possibility	AUDIO_53

Don't forget, all the example in this modal verb supplement can be heard by clicking on the audio icons or by going to:

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**THE END**

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