THE FLATMATES
Language point:
Modals - past possibilities, certainties and deductions
The Flatmates – Modals – past possibilities, certainties and deductions

You can see this language point online at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/episode65/languagepoint.shtml

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modals – basics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common modals include: <strong>must</strong>, <strong>should</strong>, <strong>might</strong>, <strong>may</strong>, <strong>can</strong>, <strong>could</strong>, <strong>will</strong>, <strong>would</strong>. Modals affect the meaning of sentences. For example, some of them can be used to show possibility or probability.</td>
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<td>I <strong>meet</strong> my boss at ten o'clock every day (a statement of fact)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I <strong>might see</strong> my boss tonight (the modal ‘<strong>might</strong>’ expresses a <strong>probability</strong> or <strong>possibility</strong>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>John <strong>can’t see</strong> his boss tonight (the modal ‘<strong>can’t</strong>’ means that it is <strong>not possible</strong> for John to see his boss tonight)</td>
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**Grammar note:**
With a present or future reference, the **modal** is followed by a **base verb** (the infinitive form of the main verb, without ‘to’).

I **might see** my boss tonight.  
He **could be** in London.  
She **may arrive** late.

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<th>Modals – possibility, probability, guesses and deductions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Modals can be used to show <strong>possibility</strong>, <strong>probability</strong>, a <strong>guess</strong> or a <strong>deduction</strong> (a guess which is based on evidence).</td>
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<td>For example, you are in your house and the doorbell rings (you can't see who is at the door). You say:</td>
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<tr>
<td>That <strong>must</strong> be the postman – This means you are certain it is the postman</td>
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<tr>
<td>That <strong>might</strong> be the postman – You are not certain, but it is possible/probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That <strong>may</strong> be the postman - You are not certain, but it is possible/probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That <strong>could</strong> be the postman - You are not certain, but it is possible/probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That <strong>can’t</strong> be the postman – You are certain that it is NOT the postman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modals and past events

**Must, might, may, could** and **can’t** are also used to talk about **past probability** and **possibility**, and to make **guesses** and **deductions** about things that happened in the past.

For example, after a shopping trip you go to the train station to return home. You can’t find your wallet.

**Past certainty:**
I **must have left** it in the last shop. I don’t remember putting it in my pocket. (This means you are certain about something that happened in the past.)

I **can’t have left** it in the last shop. I remember putting it in my pocket. (This means you are certain about something that **didn’t** happen in the past.)

**Past possibility/probability:**
Someone **might have stolen** it.
Somebody **may have taken** it.
I **could have dropped** it.

**Grammar note:**
When modals are used to talk about past events, the modal is **followed** by the **perfect infinitive**, without ‘to’.

The perfect infinitive is made with ‘**have**' + the **past participle** of the **main verb**. Here are some examples of modals followed by perfect infinitives.

- **must have left**
- **might have stolen**
- **may have taken**
- **could have dropped**

Remember, if you don’t use a modal, then you are giving a fact.
I **left** it in the shop.

**Be careful:** Modals often have other different meanings. For example, ‘**could**’ can be used to show **ability** as well as possibility. Use the context to help you understand which meaning is being used. ‘**Can**’ is NOT normally used to talk about the past: use ‘**could**’.

**Vocabulary:**

**the paperwork**
official documents, usually connected to a business transaction
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