

# THE FLATMATES

Language point:

Modals – past possibilities,  
certainties and deductions



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## BBC Learning English – The Flatmates

### 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>

#### Modals – basics

Common modals include: **must, should, might, may, can, could, will, would**.  
Modals affect the meaning of sentences. For example, some of them can be used to show possibility or probability.

I meet my boss at ten o'clock every day (a statement of fact)

I **might** see my boss tonight (the modal 'might' expresses a **probability** or **possibility**)

John **can't** see his boss tonight (the modal 'can't' means that it is **not possible** for John to see his boss tonight)

#### 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.

#### Modals – possibility, probability, guesses and deductions

Modals can be used to show **possibility, probability, a guess** or a **deduction** (a guess which is based on evidence).

For example, you are in your house and the doorbell rings (you can't see who is at the door). You say:

That **must** be the postman – This means you are certain it is the postman

That **might** be the postman – You are not certain, but it is possible/probable

That **may** be the postman - You are not certain, but it is possible/probable

That **could** be the postman - You are not certain, but it is possible/probable

That **can't** be the postman – You are certain that it is **NOT** the postman

### 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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