

1. Ability: *can, can't, cannot*

Can't is the negative, with *cannot* as a formal and written form. There is no third person -s form.

Use *can / can't*

- To describe ability or lack of it.

Eg: *Many animals can see clearly in the dark. Human beings can't do this.*

- To describe what is allowed or not allowed.

Eg: *You can look at the animals in the zoo but you can't touch them.*

- With a future meaning.

Eg: *Sorry, but I can't come to the party next week.*

- With verbs of perception: *hear, see, taste, feel, smell.*

Eg: *What can you see? I can smell gas!*

2. Ability: *be able to*

This has the same meaning as *can*.

Use *be able to*

- Instead of *can*.

Eg: *Many animals are able to see in the dark.*

- When *can* is unsuitable. Because *can* has only present and past forms, we use *be able to* for other tenses, and infinitive form.

Eg: *I haven't been able to finish my project. We hope to be able to visit you next month.*

3. Obligation: *have to / has to*

The forms follow *have: I have to, he / she has to* etc; *do I have to, does she have to; I don't have to* etc.

Use *have to / has to*

- To describe what is necessary, a rule, or something we do because other people tell us to.

Eg: *Baby birds have to learn how to fly or they won't survive.*

Eg: *Do we have to buy another ticket to see this part of the castle?*

The negative form, *don't / doesn't have to*, is used to describe something unnecessary.

Eg: *I don't have to go to work tomorrow. There's a holiday*

4. Obligation: *must / mustn't*

The negative is *mustn't*, with *must not* as a formal and written form. There is no third person -s form.

Question form is *must I, must you* etc.

Use *must* to describe something we personally think is necessary and important to do.

- There is sometimes little difference between first person *I must* and *I have to*
- some contexts:

Eg: *You must be more careful!* (= personal opinion of the speaker)

Eg: *We have to wear safety goggles.* (= an 'outside' opinion or rule)

- We use *mustn't* when we think an action is against the rules.

Eg: *You mustn't throw things in the science lab! It's dangerous!*

- Compare *mustn't* and *don't have to*.

Eg: *You mustn't use a pencil.* (it's not allowed)

You don't have to use a pen. (it's not necessary- use a pen or a pencil)

5. To give opinion or advice: *should/ought to*

Ought to / ought not to has the same meaning as *should / should not*.

- to say what we think is right or correct, or is a good idea in your opinion. This is not as strong as *must*. eg: *You should pay more attention.* Eg: *You shouldn't talk so much.*

- to give advice. eg: *I think you should study biology next year.*

6. Possibility and uncertainty

Use *may, might, could* + bare infinitive (infinitive without to)

- to describe things that will possibly happen.

Eg: The next earthquake may / might / could happen tomorrow

Use ***may not and might not*** + bare infinitive

- to describe things that will possibly not happen in the future.

Eg: The next earthquake may not / might not happen for another fifty years. It's impossible to predict exactly.

7. Request

A request is a way of politely asking someone to do something. The kind of request we use depends on where we are, whom we are talking to, and what we want the person to do.

Some forms are considered more polite than others are. (see the examples)

Can you help me with the computer?

Could you help me with the computer?

Would you help me with the computer?

Do you think you could help me with the computer?

Could you possibly help me with the computer?

Do you mind helping me with the computer?

Would you mind helping me with the computer?

Sure. / of course. / No problem.

8. Asking permission

We ask permission when we want to be allowed to do something. Some forms are considered to be more polite than others. (see the examples)

Can I leave early?

Could I leave early?

Do you think I could leave early?

May I leave early?

Do you mind if I leave early?

Is it all right if I leave early?

Yes, you can. / No, you can't.

That's all right. / Sorry, no.

9. Making offers

We make an offer when we ask if someone wants us to do something, or say that we will do it.

Eg: Shall I turn on the light? Yes, please.

Eg: I'll turn on the light. Thanks.

Making an offer can also mean asking someone if they want something.

Eg: Would you like a glass of water? Yes please. / No thanks.

10. Making suggestions

A suggestion is an idea about what we or other people could do. (see the examples)

Let's go to the library and look it up.

How about going to the library and looking it up?

Shall we go to the library and look it up?

Why don't we go to the library and look it up?

We could go to the library and look it up.