

Notes on Modal Auxiliaries

Modal auxiliaries have come to replace the old subjunctive mood, which remains only in certain tags like "If I were you" and "The committee moved that the motion be tabled."

"Present"	"Past"
can	could
may	might
must	must
shall	should
will	would

The so-called "present" forms were originally past, which is why there is no final <s> marking 3rd person singular: *I can, You can, He can* – not **He cans* – as contrasted with *I sing, you sing, he sings*.

The so-called "past" forms developed later with the addition of an old past tense suffix. For example, *could* was originally *couthe*, which became the past tense *coude*, with the <l> added via analogy with *should* and *would*.

Now all of the modals, with the exception of *will* and *shall*, do not have any strong time signalling power:

He can hear Jill now (conditions being what they are).
He could hear Jill now (if conditions were different).
He may hear Jill now (though I'm not sure).
He might hear Jill now (though I'm not sure).
He must hear Jill now (conditions being what they are).
He would hear Jill now (if he could).
He should hear Jill now (conditions being what they are).

Both *will* and *shall* are pretty strongly future:

He will hear Jill now.
He shall hear Jill now.

Ought is unusual in that it takes the *to*-form of the infinitive:

He ought to hear Jill now.

The modal always comes first in the verb phrase and carries the "time" marker, to the extent that any time marker is involved. The verb phrase

always ends with a head verb in the infinitive. For more see “Modal auxiliaries” in the [Compendium of English Orthography](#).