

MODAL VERBS : PERMISSION, ADVICE, OBLIGATION

PERMISSION

To say that something is permitted or not permitted, use “**can / can’t**”.

Example : “You can’t smoke in here. You can access the building 24 hours a day.”

(Here the meaning is the same as “to be allowed to”. You could also say : “You aren’t allowed to smoke in here. You’re allowed to access the building 24 hours a day.”)

The past form is “**could / couldn’t**”. E.g. : “We couldn’t eat in the classrooms when I was at school.”

For the future, use “**to be able to**”. E.g. : “In my new job I’ll be able to work from home if I like.”

In this context, “**may / may not**” are also possible, but they are more formal. “May” has no past or future form when speaking about permission.

ADVICE

To say that something is a good / bad thing to do, use “**should / shouldn’t**”.

Example : “You should exercise regularly. You shouldn’t eat too much fatty food.”

As this form is a way of giving your opinion, it is often used with “**I think / don’t think**”

Example : “I think you should exercise regularly. I don’t think you should eat too much fatty food.”

The past form is “**should have done / shouldn’t have done**”. E.g. : “You should have exercised more regularly when you were younger.” There is no future form.

OBLIGATION

To say that something is absolutely necessary or obligatory, use “**must**” or “**have to / has to**”.

Example : “You must do your homework. You have to score 800 points in the TOEIC exam to get your engineering diploma.”

“Must” has no past form. Use “**had to**” to talk about the past. E.g. : “When I was a child I had to go to bed at 8.00pm.”

For the future, use “**will have to**”. E.g. : “As part of my studies, I’ll have to spend three months in a foreign country.”

To say that it is absolutely necessary NOT to do something, i.e. to say that something is forbidden or prohibited, use “**mustn’t**”.

Example : “You mustn’t drive a car if you have drunk too much alcohol.”

“Mustn’t” has no past or future form. Use different structures, e.g. : “At my school, smoking **was forbidden**.” Or “We **weren’t allowed to** smoke at my school.” (past). “We **won’t be allowed to** smoke in the new building” or “Smoking in the new building **will be forbidden**.” (future)

To say that something is not obligatory, use “**don’t / doesn’t have to**”.

Example : “You don’t have to go to the meeting if you don’t want to.”

The past form is “**didn’t have to**”. E.g. : “I didn’t have to go to yesterday’s meeting as it didn’t concern me.”

The future form is “**won’t have to**”. E. g. : “I won’t have to go to tomorrow’s meeting.”