

Modals of deduction

English Grammar · B1

must and can't (Certainty)

Modals of deduction

must	might / could	can't
sure it IS	maybe	sure it ISN'T
<i>She must be tired</i>	<i>It might rain</i>	<i>He can't be hungry</i>

Modals of deduction: reference card grid

Modal verbs can also express **deduction**. When you are **very certain**:

- **must**: must be (definite positive deduction).
- **can't**: can't be (definite negative deduction).

She must be tired.

She must be very tired. (Very certain)

He can't be hungry; he just ate.

He can't be hungry; he just ate.

Note Use **can't** for negative deduction (impossible), not **mustn't** (which means “prohibited”).

might, may, could (Possibility)

When you are **not entirely sure**, but only feel that something is **possible**:

- **might / may / could**: possible, perhaps.

It might rain later.

It might rain later.

They may be at home.

They might be at home.

Degree of Certainty Comparison:

- Very certain: **must** (is) / **can't** (is not).
- Uncertain: **might** / **may** / **could** (possible).

Note All these modal verbs are followed by the **base form of the verb**: might **be**, must **be** (not *might is*).

Common Errors

- × ~~It can be John at the door.~~ → ✓ It **could** / **might** be John. — Use *could* / *might* for speculation about a **specific instance**; *can* only indicates “general possibility.”
- × ~~He might not can come.~~ → ✓ He might not **be able to** come. — Two modal verbs cannot be used together; replace the second with *be able to* / *have to*.
- × ~~Maybe he be late. / It may be rain.~~ → ✓ **Maybe he is** late. / **It may rain**. — *maybe* is an adverb and follows normal sentence structure; *may* is a modal verb and is followed by the base form. Do not mix them up.
- × ~~She must is tired.~~ → ✓ She must **be** tired. — A modal verb is always followed by the base form of the verb.