

Modal Verbs: Permission

Grammar Lesson, Examples & 30 Practice Questions

Modal Verbs for Permission

When we want to ask for permission to do something, or when we give or refuse permission to someone else, we use special verbs called **modal verbs**. A modal verb is a helper verb that goes before the main verb to add extra meaning.

In this lesson, we focus on **modal verbs for permission**. These are the words we use to say "Is it okay if I...?" or "Yes, you can..." or "No, you must not..."

The main modal verbs for permission in English are:

- **can**
- **could**
- **may**
- **might**
- **must not / mustn't**

Let's look at a simple situation before we learn the rules.

Marco is a student. He is in the classroom. He wants to open the window. He asks his teacher:

"Can I open the window, please?"

His teacher says: "Yes, you may open the window."

In this example, Marco uses **can** to ask for permission. His teacher uses **may** to give permission. Both of these are modal verbs for permission.

Rule Breakdown: How to Use Modal Verbs for Permission

Modal verbs follow one simple rule. They always come **before the base form of the main verb**. The base form is the verb with no -s, -ed, or -ing ending.

Pattern:

Subject + modal verb + base verb + (rest of sentence)

Examples:

I **can** leave early today.

She **may** use my phone.

You **must not** enter this room.

Notice that the modal verb does **not** change for he, she, or it. We do **not** add an -s.

✗ She *can's* go.

✓ She **can** go.

Can – Asking for and Giving Permission

Can is the most common and most informal modal verb for permission. We use it in everyday conversations with friends, family, and people we know well.

Asking for permission with "can":

Can I + base verb + ...?

Examples:

Can I sit here?

Can I borrow your pen?

Can I go to the bathroom, please?

Giving permission with "can":

Yes, you can + base verb.

Examples:

Yes, you can sit here.

Yes, you can borrow my pen.

Refusing permission with "can't / cannot":

No, you can't + base verb.

Examples:

No, you can't sit here. This seat is taken.

No, you cannot park here.

*Note: **cannot** is the full form. **can't** is the short form (contraction). Both mean the same thing.*

Could – Asking for Permission Politely

Could is more polite than **can**. We use it when we want to sound respectful — for example, when speaking to a teacher, a manager, a stranger, or an older person.

Asking for permission with "could":

Could I + base verb + ...?

Examples:

Could I leave the meeting early?

Could I use your computer for a moment?

Could I ask you a question?

*Important: We use **could** to ask for permission, but we do **not** usually use it to give or refuse permission. We reply with **can / can't** or **may / may not**.*

Example:

"Could I open the door?"

"Yes, **you can** open the door." 

"Yes, **you could** open the door."  (This sounds strange.)

May – Formal Permission

May is the most formal modal verb for permission. We use it in formal situations — in official rules, notices, polite business conversations, or when speaking to someone important.

Asking for permission with "may":

May I + base verb + ...?

Examples:

May I come in?

May I speak to the manager, please?

May I take a seat?

Giving permission with "may":

Yes, you may + base verb.

Examples:

Yes, you may come in.

You may take a seat.

Refusing permission with "may not":

No, you may not + base verb.

Examples:

You may not enter without a ticket.

Students may not use mobile phones during the exam.

*Note: **may not** does **not** have a common contraction in formal English. We do not say mayn't in modern English.*

Might – Tentative or Uncertain Permission

Might is sometimes used to ask for permission, but it is very formal and quite rare in modern spoken English. It sounds even more polite and hesitant than **could**.

Asking for permission with "might":

Might I + base verb + ...?

Examples:

Might I suggest a different approach?

Might I borrow this for a moment?

You will mostly see **might** for permission in written or very formal spoken English. In everyday speech, **can**, **could**, or **may** are much more common.

Must Not / Mustn't – Refusing or Forbidding Permission

We use **must not** (or **mustn't**) to say that something is **not allowed** — it is forbidden. This is stronger than **can't** or **may not**.

Examples:

You must not smoke in this building.

Students mustn't copy each other's work.

You must not touch the exhibits.

We often see **must not** on signs, notices, and in official rules.

Summary Table: Modal Verbs for Permission

Modal Verb	Use	Formality	Example
can	Ask / Give / Refuse permission	Informal / Everyday	Can I sit here? Yes, you can.
can't / cannot	Refuse permission	Informal / Everyday	You can't park here.
could	Ask for permission politely	Polite / Neutral	Could I use your phone?
may	Ask / Give / Refuse permission	Formal	May I come in? Yes, you may.
may not	Refuse permission (formal)	Formal	You may not enter this area.
might	Ask for permission (very formal / rare)	Very formal	Might I make a suggestion?
must not / mustn't	Forbid permission strongly	Formal / Official	You must not touch the exhibits.

Formality Scale: Which Modal Verb to Choose?

Choosing the right modal verb depends on the situation. Here is a simple guide from most informal to most formal:

Situation	Best Choice	Example
Talking to a friend	can	Can I try your food?
Talking to a teacher or colleague	could	Could I hand this in tomorrow?

Situation	Best Choice	Example
Talking to a manager or stranger	could / may	Could I / May I speak with you?
Official signs and notices	may not / must not	Visitors may not use this entrance.
Very formal written English	might / may	Might I enquire about the position?

Negative Forms and Contractions

Here are the full forms and contractions for modal verbs for permission:

Full Form	Contraction	Example
cannot	can't	You can't leave yet.
could not	couldn't	(Not commonly used for permission)
may not	(no contraction used)	You may not enter.
must not	mustn't	You mustn't run in the corridor.

Remember: **cannot** is written as one word, not two. *Can not* (two words) is possible but much less common.

Question Forms with Modal Verbs for Permission

To ask for permission, we put the modal verb **before** the subject (usually *I* or *we*).

Pattern for questions:

Modal verb + *I / we* + base verb + ...?

Question	Positive Answer	Negative Answer
Can I open the window?	Yes, you can.	No, you can't.
Could I leave early?	Yes, of course you can.	No, I'm afraid you can't.
May I use the phone?	Yes, you may.	No, you may not.
Can we bring food in here?	Yes, you can.	No, you can't bring food in here.

Important Differences and Special Cases

Can vs. Could: Not About Past and Present

When we use **could** for permission, it does **not** mean past tense. Both **can** and **could** are used in the present to ask for permission. The difference is only about **politeness**.

Can I leave? → informal, direct

Could I leave? → polite, more respectful

May Not vs. Might Not: Different Meanings

Be careful! **may not** and **might not** do not always mean the same thing.

- **You may not enter.** → Permission is refused. (You are not allowed to enter.)
- **She might not come.** → This is about possibility, not permission. (Perhaps she will not come.)

Permission vs. Ability: "Can" Has Two Meanings

Can is also used to talk about ability — what someone is able to do. This is different from permission.

Can I sit here? → Asking for *permission* (Am I allowed to sit here?)

I can swim. → Talking about *ability* (I know how to swim.)

The context makes the meaning clear.

Giving Permission to a Third Person

When we give permission to someone else (not "you"), we can say:

He can leave early today. (I allow him to leave.)

She may use the computer. (She has permission to use it.)

Common Mistakes

✗ *Can she goes now?*

✓ **Can she go now?** (Always use the base form of the verb after a modal.)

✗ *Could I to use your pen?*

✓ **Could I use your pen?** (Do not use "to" after a modal verb.)

✗ *She cans leave early.*

✓ **She can leave early.** (Never add -s to a modal verb.)

✗ *May I to come in?*

✓ **May I come in?** (No "to" after modal verbs.)

✗ *You cannot to park here.*

✓ **You cannot park here.** (No "to" after cannot.)

✗ *Could you leave? Yes, I could.* (giving permission)

✓ **Could you leave? Yes, you can.** (Use *can* or *may* to give permission, not *could*.)

✗ *Can not* (two words for ability/permission)

✓ **Cannot** (one word) or **can't** (contraction).

Modal Verbs for Permission: Quick Summary

Here is what we have learnt about **modal verbs for permission**:

- We use modal verbs to **ask for**, **give**, and **refuse** permission.

- The main modal verbs for permission are: **can, could, may, might, must not**.
- Modal verbs are always followed by the **base form** of the verb (no -s, -ed, or -ing).
- Modal verbs do **not** change for he, she, or it.
- Do **not** use "to" after a modal verb.
- **Can** is informal and everyday. **Could** is polite. **May** is formal. **Might** is very formal and rare.
- **Must not / mustn't** is used to strongly forbid something.
- Use **can** or **may** to give permission in a reply — not **could**.

Now practise **modal verbs for permission** in the exercises below.

Modal Verbs: Permission – Practice Test

B1 | 30 Questions: Multiple Choice, Fill-in-the-Gap & Fill-in-the-Blank

Part 1: Multiple Choice (Questions 1–10)

1 Students ____ use their phones during the exam. It is not allowed.

- A** must
- B** can
- C** cannot
- D** should

2 Excuse me, ____ I open the window? It's very hot in here.

- A** should
- B** must
- C** may
- D** will

3 You ____ park your car here. There is a sign that says it is permitted.

- A** can
- B** must not
- C** ought not
- D** need not

4 Children under 18 ____ enter this club. It is for adults only.

- A** can
- B** may
- C** must
- D** cannot

5 ____ I borrow your pen for a moment, please?

- A** Must
- B** Could
- C** Should
- D** Would

6 The manager said that employees ____ leave early on Fridays if their work is finished.

- A** must
- B** could
- C** ought to
- D** need

7 You ____ take photos inside the museum. It is strictly forbidden.

- A** can
- B** are allowed to
- C** may not
- D** could

8 In this library, visitors ____ use the computers for up to one hour.

- A** must not
- B** are allowed to
- C** cannot
- D** need not

9 Could you ask the teacher if we ____ hand in the assignment tomorrow instead of today?

- A** must
- B** can
- C** should
- D** ought

10 Passengers ____ smoke anywhere on the plane. It is against airline rules.

- A** can
- B** are permitted to
- C** must not
- D** could

Part 2: Fill in the Gap (Questions 11–20)

11 You ____ use your phone during the exam — it's against the rules.

- A** cannot
- B** could
- C** may

12 ____ I leave the table, please? I've finished eating.

- A** May
- B** Should
- C** Must

13 Students ____ bring a dictionary into the test room if they ask the teacher first.

- A** can
- B** must
- C** should

14 He ____ park his car here — there's a sign that says 'No Parking'.

- A** can't
- B** shouldn't
- C** couldn't

15 When I was a child, I ____ stay up late only on weekends.

- A** could
- B** can
- C** may

16 ____ we take photos inside the museum? I'd love to remember this visit.

- A** Can
- B** Must
- C** Will

17 You ____ sit wherever you like — all the seats are free.

- A** can
- B** must
- C** might

18 Visitors ____ not touch the artwork in the gallery.

- A** may
- B** should
- C** will

19 Could I ____ your pen for a moment? Mine has stopped working.

- A** borrow
- B** to borrow
- C** borrowing

20 In many countries, teenagers ____ drive a car until they are 18 years old.

- A** cannot
- B** must not
- C** should not

Part 3: Fill in the Blank (Questions 21–30)

21 Excuse me, _____ I use your phone for a moment?

22 You _____ leave the classroom when you finish your exam.

23 Students _____ use their mobile phones during the test.

24 _____ we sit here, or is this table reserved?

25 You _____ borrow my umbrella if you need it.

26 I'm afraid you _____ park your car in this area.

27 Do you think I _____ take a day off next Friday?

28 Visitors _____ take photographs inside the museum, but only without flash.

29 You _____ ask permission to use the kitchen — it's for everyone.

30 Passengers _____ smoke anywhere on this train.

Answer Key & Explanations

Modal Verbs: Permission | B1

Part 1: Multiple Choice

1. **C** Correct Answer: cannot ✓ Explanation: We use cannot (can't) to deny permission — to say something is not allowed. You cannot use your phone here means it is forbidden.
2. **C** Correct Answer: may ✓ Explanation: May I...? is a polite and formal way to ask for permission. It is commonly used in formal or polite situations. May I open the window?
3. **A** Correct Answer: can ✓ Explanation: Can is used to express that something is permitted or allowed. You can park here means parking is allowed in this place.
4. **D** Correct Answer: cannot ✓ Explanation: Cannot is used to say that something is not permitted. Children cannot enter means they do not have permission to go inside.
5. **B** Correct Answer: Could ✓ Explanation: Could I...? is a polite way to ask for permission. It is slightly more formal and polite than Can I...? and very common in everyday English.
6. **B** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: Could can be used to report permission given in the past. The manager said they could leave means he gave them permission to leave.
7. **C** Correct Answer: may not ✓ Explanation: May not is a formal way to say that something is not permitted. You may not take photos is often used in official signs and rules.
8. **B** Correct Answer: are allowed to ✓ Explanation: Are allowed to is a common expression to show that something is permitted. Visitors are allowed to use the computers means they have permission to do so.
9. **B** Correct Answer: can ✓ Explanation: Can is used here to ask for permission — specifically whether it is okay or allowed to submit the work later. Can we hand it in tomorrow? is a common informal request.
10. **C** Correct Answer: must not ✓ Explanation: Must not is used to say that something is strictly forbidden or not allowed. It is stronger than cannot and is often used in official rules and regulations.

Part 2: Fill in the Gap

11. **A** Correct Answer: cannot ✓ Explanation: We use cannot (can't) to express that something is not permitted. You cannot use your phone during the exam means it is forbidden.
12. **A** Correct Answer: May ✓ Explanation: May is a polite and formal way to ask for permission. May I leave the table? is more polite than Can I leave?

13. **A** Correct Answer: can ✓ Explanation: Can is used to express permission in everyday situations. Students can bring a dictionary means it is allowed under certain conditions.
14. **A** Correct Answer: can't ✓ Explanation: Can't expresses that something is not allowed. He can't park here means parking is prohibited, as shown by the sign.
15. **A** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: Could is used to talk about permission in the past. I could stay up late on weekends means I was allowed to do so when I was young.
16. **A** Correct Answer: Can ✓ Explanation: Can is commonly used to ask for permission in informal or everyday situations. Can we take photos? is a natural, polite request.
17. **A** Correct Answer: can ✓ Explanation: Can is used here to give permission. You can sit wherever you like tells someone they are free to choose any seat.
18. **A** Correct Answer: may ✓ Explanation: May not is a formal way to express that something is not permitted. Visitors may not touch the artwork is a rule stated in a formal setting like a gallery.
19. **A** Correct Answer: borrow ✓ Explanation: After modal verbs like could, we always use the base form of the verb (infinitive without to). Could I borrow your pen? is a polite permission request.
20. **A** Correct Answer: cannot ✓ Explanation: Cannot expresses that something is not legally permitted. Teenagers cannot drive until they are 18 refers to a rule set by law, making it the best choice here.

Part 3: Fill in the Blank

21. **can|could** Correct Answer: can / could ✓ Explanation: We use can or could to ask for permission. Could is slightly more polite. Could I use your phone? is a common way to ask permission in everyday situations.
22. **may** Correct Answer: may ✓ Explanation: May is used to give formal permission. A teacher might say You may leave to allow students to go. It is more formal than can.
23. **cannot|can't** Correct Answer: cannot / can't ✓ Explanation: Cannot or can't is used to deny permission. Students can't use phones during the test means it is not allowed.
24. **Could** Correct Answer: Could ✓ Explanation: Could is used to ask for permission politely. Could we sit here? is a polite way to ask if something is allowed. It is more formal than can.
25. **can** Correct Answer: can ✓ Explanation: Can is used to give permission in informal situations. You can borrow my umbrella means the speaker allows it. It is a common and friendly way to permit something.
26. **may not|cannot|can't** Correct Answer: may not / cannot / can't ✓ Explanation: May not and cannot are both used to refuse permission. You may not park here is more formal, while you can't park here is more everyday. Both mean it is not permitted.

27. **could|can** Correct Answer: could / can ✓ Explanation: Could and can are both used to ask for permission. Using could in Do you think I could take a day off? sounds more polite and less direct than can.
28. **may** Correct Answer: may ✓ Explanation: May is used in formal or written rules to grant permission. Visitors may take photographs is the kind of language found in signs or official notices. It is more formal than can.
29. **don't have to|don't need to** Correct Answer: don't have to / don't need to ✓ Explanation: Don't have to and don't need to express that permission is not required — there is no obligation to ask. You don't have to ask means it is already allowed freely.
30. **are not allowed to|cannot|can't** Correct Answer: are not allowed to / cannot / can't ✓ Explanation: Are not allowed to and cannot both express that something is not permitted. Passengers are not allowed to smoke is common in official rules and notices. Can't is the informal spoken version.

Score Guide

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 27–30 Correct | Excellent! You have mastered this topic. |
| 23–26 Correct | Very good! Review the rules you missed. |
| 18–22 Correct | Good start. Re-read the lesson and examples. |
| 0–17 Correct | Study the lesson again before retaking the test. |