

What Are Auxiliary Verbs? (with Examples)

Auxiliary Verbs

An auxiliary verb (or a helping verb as it's also called) is used with a main verb to help express the main verb's tense, mood, or voice.

The main auxiliary verbs are *to be*, *to have*, and *to do*. They appear in the following forms:

- **To Be:** am, is, are, was, were, being, been, will be
- **To Have:** has, have, had, having, will have
- **To Do:** does, do, did, will do

Auxiliary Verbs

auxiliary verbs	various forms
be	am is are was were being been will be
have	has had having will have
do	does did will do

help to express **tense**, **mood**, or **voice**

tense

He **had** eaten the whole pie.
past perfect tense

He **was** snoring all night.
past progressive tense

mood

Did it go well?
interrogative mood

Do try our tarts.
imperative mood

voice

The pie **was** eaten by the dog.
passive voice

There is another kind of auxiliary verb called a modal auxiliary verb (or modal verb). The modal auxiliary verbs are *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *ought to*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*. The modal auxiliary verbs never change their forms.

Examples of Auxiliary Verbs Expressing Tense

Here are some examples of auxiliary verbs expressing **tense**. In these examples, the main verbs are in bold and the auxiliary verbs are highlighted.

- She **was** **waiting** for an hour.
- She **is** **waiting** in the hall.
- She **will be** **waiting** outside.

(In each of these examples, the auxiliary verb *to be* helps to form the progressive tense, which is the tense used for ongoing actions.)

- She **had** **drunk** it before we arrived.
- She **has** **drunk** it already.
- She **will have** **drunk** it by then.

(In each of these examples, the auxiliary verb *to have* helps to form the perfect tense, which is the tense used for expressing an action's completion.)

- She **had been** **studying** before the incident.
- She **has been** **studying**.
- She **will have been** **studying** for a month at that point.

(In each of these examples, the auxiliary verbs *have* and *been* help to form the perfect progressive tense, which is the tense used for expressing an ongoing action's completion.)

Examples of Auxiliary Verbs Expressing Voice

Here are some examples of auxiliary verbs expressing **voice**.

- Our dessert **was eaten** by the dog.
- The geese **are driven** through the snicket.
- The phone **will be disconnected** tomorrow.

(In these examples, the auxiliary verb *to be* helps to form the **passive voice**. A verb is said to be in the passive voice when its subject does not perform the action of the verb but has the action done to it.)

Examples of Auxiliary Verbs Expressing Mood

Here are some examples of auxiliary verbs being used to express **mood**.

- **Did you win?**
(Here, the auxiliary verb *to do* is used to form the interrogative mood, i.e., to ask a question.)
- **Don't forget** your wallet.
(Here, the auxiliary verb *to do* (in its negative form) is used to form the imperative mood, i.e., to give an order.)

Examples of Modal Auxiliary Verbs

Let's now look at the modal auxiliary verbs. Modal auxiliary verbs combine with other verbs to express ideas such as necessity, possibility, intention, and ability. In each example below, the verb phrase is in bold and the modal auxiliary verb is highlighted.

Modal auxiliary verbs expressing necessity:

- It is during our darkest moments that we **must focus** to see the light. (Greek philosopher Aristotle)
- I don't say we all **ought to misbehave**, but we **ought to look** as if we could. (Actor Orson Welles)
- A baby is God's opinion that life **should go on**. (American Poet Carl Sandburg)

Modal auxiliary verbs expressing possibility:

- It is never too late to be what you **might have been**. (George Eliot)
- If there were no bad people, there **would be** no good lawyers. (Author Charles Dickens)

Modal auxiliary verbs expressing intention:

- We **shall heal** our wounds, collect our dead and continue fighting. (Founding father of the People's Republic of China Mao Zedong)

Modal auxiliary verbs expressing ability:

- No one **can feel** as helpless as the owner of a sick goldfish. (Cartoonist Kin Hubbard)
- Well, either side **could win** it, or it **could be** a draw. (Football manager Ron Atkinson)
(Sometimes, more than one sense is expressed. Here, *could* expresses both ability and possibility.)

Be, *have* and *do* are not always auxiliary verbs. Here they are as the main verbs (in bold) being supported by auxiliary modal verbs (highlighted).

- I have inspiration. If I was educated, I **would be** a damn fool. (Musician Bob Marley)
(That should be *were educated*, Bob. Just sayin'.)
- I really like vampire books. I **might have** a problem. (Irish writer Sarah Rees Brennan)
- If you **can dream** it, you **can do** it. (Enzo Ferrari)

There's another related term we should cover: verb phrase. A verb phrase is made up of the main verb and any auxiliary verbs. Any adverbs that appear alongside or inside a verb phrase are not part of the verb phrase. In each example below, the verb phrase is in bold with auxiliary verbs highlighted.

- Rose **has been drinking** heavily since breakfast.
(The adverb *heavily* is not part of the verb phrase.)
- Peter **is definitely taking** you to the airport.
(The adverb *definitely* is not part of the verb phrase.)

Why Should I Care about Auxiliary Verbs?

I'd wager you use auxiliary verbs and modal auxiliary verbs without giving them a second thought, so I'm mindful that this page has covered a lot of gumpf that you don't really need. Well, that's true provided we're talking about working in English. If you start learning a foreign language, it won't be too long before you'll be unpicking how they express tense, voice and mood. And, do you know what's a good starting point for that? Understanding how we do it.

That said, there are three noteworthy points related to auxiliary verbs.

(Point 1) Don't write *could of*, *should of*, or *would of*.

If you ever write *could of*, *should of*, or *would of*, you're toast. It's a writing howler. It's *could've* (a contraction of *could have*), *should've* (*should have*), or *would've* (*would have*).

(Point 2) Use *can* for ability and *may* for permission.

Can is a modal auxiliary verb meaning *to be able to*. *May* is a modal auxiliary verb meaning *to be permitted to*.

- I can whistle.
(I have the ability to whistle.)
- May I have a biscuit?
(Am I permitted to have a biscuit?)
- "Can I go outside, grandma?"
- "You can, dear. You're just not allowed."

Nowadays, *can* is often used for permission, especially in an informal setting.

- Can I have a biscuit, grandma?
- "You can, dear. You're just not allowed one."
(*Can* is fine here, but, hey, it's still a grandma's job issue a "correction.")

(Point 3) Expand *can't* to *cannot* not *can not*.

Cannot (one word) is the most common expansion of the [contraction](#) *can't*.

- You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today. (US President Abraham Lincoln)
- There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full. (US statesman Henry Kissinger)

Can't can also be expanded to *can not* (i.e., two words), but this is less common and usually reserved for emphasis.

- I cannot do it!
(*Can't* is usually expanded to *cannot*.)
- I can not do it!
(This is considered more emphatic.)

Of course, the words *can* and *not* sometimes appear alongside each other when the *not* forms part of another construction (such as *not only*).

- Kevin can not only rap but dance too.
(Here, *can not* must be written as two words. It's not an expansion of *can't*.)

Key Points

- Don't write *could of*, *should of*, or *would of*. Just don't.
- To keep your grandchildren grammatically pure, correct their use of "*Can I*" to "*May I*" when they're seeking permission.
- Expand *can't* to *cannot* not *can not* unless you're trying to be really emphatic.
(Bear in mind that your readers will probably just think you've misspelt *cannot*.)