Helping Verbs

Helping verbs have no meaning on their own. We use helping verbs with main verbs. They "help" the main verb (which has the real meaning). There are only about 15 helping verbs in English, and we divide them into two basic groups: Primary helping verbs and modal verbs.

Primary helping verbs (3 verbs)

These are the verbs *be*, *do*, and *have*. Note that we can use these three verbs as helping verbs **or** as main verbs. On this page we talk about them as helping verbs. We use them in the following cases:

- **be**
    - to make continuous tenses (He **is** watching TV.)
    - to make the passive (Small fish **are** eaten by big fish.)

- **have**
    - to make perfect tenses (I **have** finished my homework.)

- **do**
    - to make negatives (I **do** not like you.)
    - to ask questions (**Do** you want some coffee?)
    - to show emphasis (I **do** want you to pass your exam.)
    - to stand for a main verb in some constructions (He speaks faster than she **does**.)

The second group of helping verbs is the set of modal verbs. They are described on the next page.

Modal helping verbs (or just modal verbs)

We use modal verbs to "modify" the meaning of the main verb in some way. A modal verb expresses necessity or possibility or duty, and they change the main verb in that sense. These are the most important modal verbs:

- can, could
- may, might
- will, would,
- shall, should
- must
- ought to

Here are examples using modal verbs:

- I **can't** speak Chinese. *Speak* is the main verb. *Can* is the modal verb.
- John **may** arrive late.
- You **should** see a doctor.
- I really **must** go now.

Think about it:

We could say, "John arrives late." That's definite. But if we add *may* to the sentence, we make his arriving a mere possibility – not a definite matter.

Can expresses ability

May expresses possibility.

Should expresses your duty to do something.

Must expresses necessity.

Can, may, should, must, and several other words are MODAL VERBS.