

THE USE OF MODAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Annotation. *In academic writing, clarity, precision, and tone are essential. One of the key grammatical tools that help writers achieve these qualities is the modal verb. Modal verbs such as can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would allow writers to express attitudes toward the possibility, necessity, or desirability of an action. They help scholars communicate ideas without overstating claims, signal levels of certainty, and maintain the formal tone expected in scholarly discourse.*

Academic writing rarely deals in absolute truths. Most research findings are interpreted within a specific context, and generalizations must be approached with caution. For this reason, modal verbs are frequently used to hedge statements, offer interpretations, and present conclusions tentatively rather than definitively. This strategy reflects the critical, evidence-based nature of academic research and prevents the writer from making unsupported or overly confident claims.

Key words: *Academic writing, phrases, modal verbs, can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would, possibility, reserchers, outcomes, express, investigate, theory, cultural contex.*

Writers often use modal verbs to express varying degrees of certainty about research results or theoretical positions. For example, saying that “This result may indicate a causal relationship” allows for the possibility without asserting it as a fact. In contrast, “This result must indicate a causal relationship” suggests a much higher level of confidence. The difference between such modal choices reflects how cautious or assertive the writer wants to be.

Modal verbs are also essential when discussing possible outcomes, implications, or future research directions. A sentence like “This theory could be applied to different cultural contexts” invites further exploration without making strong claims. Similarly, phrases like “Future studies should investigate this issue further” use modal verbs to recommend future action in a way that is both polite and academically appropriate.

Aspects of modal verb usage in academic contexts: Expressing degrees of certainty: Academic writing often requires the author to make claims based on evidence rather than stating absolute truths. Modal verbs help to express varying degrees of certainty. For example: This result *may* indicate a correlation between the variables. It *must* be noted that the sample size was limited. Explanation: Using *may*, *might*, or *could* signals tentativeness, while *must* and *will* indicate stronger certainty.

Aspects of modal verb usage in academic contexts: Expressing degrees of certainty, indicating possibility or probability, softening claims and avoiding absolutes, expressing obligation and necessity, suggesting recommendations and implications, constructing conditional or hypothetical situations, enhancing formality and politeness, supporting critical evaluation.

Modal verbs are indispensable tools in academic writing. They help balance assertiveness with caution, reflect the complexity of research, and guide the reader through nuanced

arguments. Mastery of modal usage allows writers to present ideas more precisely, maintain academic tone, and contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourse.

Indicating possibility or probability: Writers use modal verbs to suggest that something is possible or probable, which is crucial when interpreting data or presenting hypotheses.

- The outcome *could* be influenced by external factors.
- This method *might* yield different results in other contexts.

Use *might*, *could*, and *may* to avoid overgeneralizing findings.

Softening claims and avoiding absolutes: Academic integrity encourages writers to present ideas carefully and avoid making unsupported claims. Modal verbs soften strong assertions.

- The treatment *should* improve patient outcomes.
- The theory *might* not apply to all demographics.

Expressing obligation and necessity: Modal verbs such as *must* and *should* are used when giving recommendations, outlining rules, or emphasizing methodological requirements.

- Participants *must* provide informed consent.
- Researchers *should* consider ethical implications.

In presenting hypothetical or conditional ideas, modal verbs allow writers to explore possibilities. Academic writing frequently discusses “what if” scenarios, especially when reflecting on limitations or suggesting alternatives. For instance, “If the sample size were larger, the results might have been more generalizable” uses *might* to reflect a conditional and uncertain outcome. When giving recommendations or outlining best practices, modal verbs like *should*, *must*, and *shall* are commonly used. “Researchers should obtain informed consent from all participants” signals a recommended ethical guideline. In contrast, “Participants must meet the eligibility criteria” conveys a strict requirement.

Modal verbs contribute to politeness and formality, especially when critiquing other scholars’ work or proposing revisions. Saying “This interpretation might overlook certain socio-political factors” is more respectful than stating “This interpretation overlooks certain socio-political factors.” This softening of criticism is a key element of maintaining collegial tone in academic writing.

Suggesting recommendations and implications: Modal verbs help suggest possible applications, future research directions, or implications without making definitive predictions.

- Future studies *should* investigate this trend further.
- Policy makers *could* consider revising current regulations.

Constructing conditional or hypothetical situations: Modal verbs are frequently used in conditional sentences to discuss hypothetical scenarios or to explore alternative interpretations.

- If the sample were larger, the results *might* differ.
- This issue *could* have been avoided with better planning.

Enhancing formality and politeness: Academic writing values politeness and a respectful tone, especially in critiques, suggestions, or collaborative work. Modal verbs contribute to this tone.

- It *would* be advisable to conduct further research.
- This approach *might* be less effective in urban settings.

Supporting critical evaluation: When evaluating sources or interpreting results, modal verbs enable critical analysis without dismissing others’ work outright.

- The author’s conclusion *may* be influenced by selection bias.

- These findings *should* be interpreted with caution.

In literature reviews and discussions, modal verbs support the writer's ability to evaluate claims critically. For example, stating that "The author's conclusion may be influenced by a limited dataset" raises a valid concern without dismissing the work entirely. Such usage allows for critical engagement while upholding academic courtesy and objectivity. Furthermore, modal verbs can highlight the limitations of a study. Rather than claiming certainty, writers often acknowledge the boundaries of their research using modals like *might* or *could*. "These findings could be influenced by regional factors" admits the potential for alternative interpretations, encouraging a nuanced reading of the results.

In argumentative writing, modals help construct logical reasoning and structured debate.

They allow authors to weigh opposing viewpoints and present their positions without sounding overly dogmatic. Phrases like "This argument would hold more weight if supported by longitudinal data" present critiques or suggestions in a constructive manner.

Common modal verbs and their academic uses

Modal Verb	Function	Example
may	possibility, politeness	The results may indicate a new trend.
might	weaker possibility	The drug might cause side effects.
could	possibility, suggestion	The model could be improved.
should	advice, recommendation	Participants should be monitored closely.
must	necessity, obligation	Researchers must follow ethical guidelines.
can	ability, general possibility	The method can detect small changes.
will	future certainty (use with caution)	The procedure will reduce costs.
would	hypothetical, polite suggestion	The effect would be greater under different conditions.

Conclusion: Finally, the consistent and accurate use of modal verbs reflects language proficiency and academic maturity. It demonstrates that the writer understands the difference between asserting, suggesting, recommending, and speculating all vital functions in scholarly writing. In conclusion, modal verbs are not merely grammatical devices; they are integral to the rhetorical strategy of academic communication. They allow writers to control tone, express uncertainty, make polite suggestions, and present complex ideas with appropriate caution.

Mastering modal usage is therefore essential for anyone aiming to write effectively in academic contexts.

Mastering modal verbs isn't just about grammar—it's about developing a responsible and credible academic voice. Good academic writers are cautious, respectful of other views, and aware of the limitations of their arguments. Modal verbs help you achieve all of this. Keep practicing by rewriting sentences with modal verbs to change the tone, and pay attention to how scholars use them in published work. Over time, using modals correctly will become second nature and will greatly enhance the quality of your academic writing.

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