

Modal verbs

— DIE MODALVERBEN

Modal verbs express ability, permission or obligation alongside another verb: Ich will Deutsch lernen.

Ich muss nicht means “I don’t have to”, not “I mustn’t”. English has modals too, but German modals split the sentence in two and come with a few nasty traps. Here: the table of all six, the sentence that splits in two, and the traps, named one by one.

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01 00:12

The sentence splits in two — English does it too

 **SHORTCUT** A modal verb **splits the sentence in two**: the conjugated modal in second position, the main verb **as an infinitive at the very end**.

In English you say “I **want to learn** German”. Two parts: the actual action (*learn*) and the intention (*want*). German does exactly this, it just sets them further apart: **the intention in second position, the action at the very end**.

✓ Ich **will** Deutsch **lernen**.

I want to learn German.

The verb at the end stays an **infinitive** — **lernen, gehen, sprechen**. It is not conjugated, takes no ending, never changes with the person. Only the modal verb is conjugated.

✗ Ich kann Deutsch **spreche**.

Wrong — two verbs are never conjugated at once.

✓ Ich kann Deutsch **sprechen**.

I can speak German.

① This two-ended structure is called the **Satzklammer** — the “sentence bracket”. The modal verb **opens** the bracket, the infinitive **closes** it. Everything in between sits inside the bracket.

02 00:45

Six verbs — and what they really say

VERB	DICTIONARY MEANING	WHAT IT REALLY SAYS	EXAMPLE
können	to be able to	you have the ability or the chance	Ich kann schwimmen .
müssen	to have to	obligation — it comes from outside	Ich muss arbeiten .
dürfen	to be allowed to	someone allowed it / didn't allow it	Darf ich hier rauchen?
wollen	to want	your own will — it sounds <i>hard</i>	Ich will nach Berlin .
sollen	to be supposed to	someone else's wish , or advice	Du sollst mehr schlafen .
möchten	would like to	the one you will use most in daily life	Ich möchte einen Kaffee .

mögen is a verb of its own: “to like”. **möchten** is its polite form, and in practice you learn it as a separate verb. Don’t mix them up — **Ich mag Kaffee** (I like coffee) ≠ **Ich möchte Kaffee** (I’d like coffee).

03 01:25

Conjugation — spot two things and the rest follows

Modal verbs have two oddities in conjugation, both in the **singular**: (1) **ich** and **er/sie/es** are **identical**, neither takes an ending. (2) The stem vowel changes. In the plural everything goes back to normal.

	KÖNNEN	MÜSSEN	DÜRFEN	WOLLEN	SOLLEN	MÖCHTEN
ich	kann	muss	darf	will	soll	möchte
du	kannst	musst	darfst	willst	sollst	möchtest
er/sie/es	kann	muss	darf	will	soll	möchte
wir	können	müssen	dürfen	wollen	sollen	möchten
ihr	könnt	müsst	dürft	wollt	sollt	möchtet
sie/Sie	können	müssen	dürfen	wollen	sollen	möchten

Careful: there is no **ich kanne**. With regular verbs you say **ich lerne**, but with a modal verb **that -e drops**. It is one of the mistakes teachers correct most often.

sollen and **möchten** never change their stem — which makes them the two easiest. In your first week of speaking you can lean on these two.

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04 02:20

Five traps



TRAP 01

können ≠ dürfen — “can I” is two different things

✓ **Kann ich Deutsch sprechen?**

Am I able to speak German? → asking about my ability

✓ **Darf ich hier parken?**

May I park here? → asking for permission

English uses “can” for both (“Can I park here?”). German keeps them apart: **are you able to = können, are you allowed to = dürfen**. At the doctor’s, at work, in an official place, someone who doesn’t make this distinction is heard immediately.

① In everyday speech Germans sometimes say **Kann ich...?** too, and nobody dies. But **in writing and in the exam**, permission = **dürfen**.



TRAP 02

nicht müssen ≠ nicht dürfen — the most expensive mistake

✓ **Du *musst nicht* kommen.**

You DON’T HAVE TO come. (come if you like)

✗ **Du *darfst nicht* kommen.**

You MUSTN’T come. (it is forbidden)

English has the same split (“don’t have to” vs “mustn’t”), but **muss nicht** *looks* like “must not” — and that is the trap. One means **freedom**, the other a **ban**. Get it wrong at work and you have just said “you’re not allowed to come”.

The polite way to negate an obligation: **Du brauchst nicht zu kommen.** — “you don’t need to come”. This is what you hear most in conversation.



TRAP 03

wollen sounds rude — don't use it in a café

✗ Ich ~~will~~ einen Kaffee.

"I want a coffee" — but it lands like "give me a coffee".

✓ Ich **möchte** einen Kaffee, bitte.

I'd like a coffee, please.

wollen isn't wrong — it is **harsh**. It states will: **Ich will Arzt werden**. (I want to become a doctor.) For orders, requests and wishes use **möchten**.



TRAP 04

sollen = not your own wish

✓ Ich **soll** um 8 Uhr da sein.

I'm supposed to be there at 8. → someone told me so

✓ **Soll** ich dir helfen?

Shall I help you? → an offer of help

müssen is obligation (no way out), **sollen** is **someone else's expectation**: your boss, your doctor, your mother. And there is **Soll ich...?**, the standard German way to offer help.



TRAP 05

Where does nicht go?

✓ Ich kann heute **nicht** kommen.

I can't come today.

✗ Ich kann ~~nicht~~ heute kommen.

Wrong order — it trips on the ear.

The rule is simple: **nicht stands right before the infinitive at the end**. Time and place come before it. If a single object is being negated, **kein-** steps in: **Ich kann keinen Kaffee trinken**.

05 03:40

Sometimes the final verb is missing altogether

When a direction or a language is involved, Germans can't be bothered to say the infinitive — and that is **correct** German. The verb drops, and everybody understands what is meant.

✓ **Ich muss nach Hause.**

I have to go home. (**gehen** isn't said)

✓ **Ich kann Deutsch.**

I know German. (**sprechen** isn't said)

✓ **Ich will nach Berlin.**

I want to go to Berlin.

- ① This shortcut works only with a **direction** (nach Hause • in die Stadt • zur Arbeit) and with **language/skill** (Deutsch • Auto). There is no «Ich muss ein Buch.».

06 04:20

Don't build the past with Perfekt — modals speak Präteritum

When speaking German, the past is usually the Perfekt: **Ich habe gearbeitet**. But with modal verbs it flips — **even in speech you use the Präteritum**, and it is the only form that sounds right.

NOW	PAST (PRÄTERITUM)	EXAMPLE
kann	konnte	Ich konnte nicht schlafen . — I couldn't sleep .
muss	musste	Ich musste arbeiten . — I had to work .
darf	durfte	Ich durfte nicht rein . — I wasn't allowed in .
will	wollte	Ich wollte dich anrufen . — I was going to call you .
soll	sollte	Ich sollte früher kommen . — I was supposed to come earlier .
möchte	wollte	möchte has no past — wollte is used instead .

Spot the pattern: **the Umlaut drops, -te is added**. können → konnte, müssen → musste, dürfen → durfte. You learn all six in one go.

Modal verbs do have a Perfekt too (**Ich habe nicht kommen können**), but it is rare in everyday German and nobody expects it from you at A1-A2. For now, know the Präteritum list and that is enough.

07 05:20

What changes in questions and in tone

In a question the modal verb moves to the **front**, and the infinitive stays at the end. The bracket isn't broken, only the opening end moves forward.

✓ **Kannst du mir bitte helfen?**

Can you help me, please?

✓ **Können Sie das bitte wiederholen?**

Could you repeat that, please? → the sentence you will use most in class

- **Kann ich...?** — “Can I...?” · your own ability
- **Darf ich...?** — “May I...?” · the right choice in formal settings
- **Soll ich...?** — “Shall I...?” · an offer of help
- **Könnten Sie...?** — “Could you...?” · the most polite form

① **Könnten Sie** is Konjunktiv II — a B1 topic, but you can use it as a fixed phrase from today. In a letter, or a one-line request in an email, that is enough.

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08 05:40

Each of the six has its own page

This page builds the **shared** logic of the six modals: the same conjugation pattern, the same sentence structure. But each one has its own trap — **nicht müssen** means “no need”, not “forbidden”, **wollen** sounds rude in a restaurant, **mögen** and **möchten** are two separate jobs of the same verb. Each page below takes one modal all the way.

09 05:50

What to do this week

Modal verbs don't stick by studying, they stick by **speaking** — you need them dozens of times a day. Don't try to memorise the table; fill these three patterns with your own life.

- **Ich muss heute ...** — three things you have to do today
- **Ich kann ... , aber ich kann nicht ...** — one thing you can do, one you can't
- **Ich möchte ...** — one thing you want this week

① Write five sentences and read them aloud. You will notice a tiny hesitation when you say the final verb — the day that hesitation is gone, this topic is done.

10 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

10 06:10

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+16

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