

What Are Auxiliary Verbs?

Auxiliary verbs are also known as **helping verbs** and can include **modal verbs** (can/could, may/might, will/would, shall/should, must). As mentioned in lesson one, verbs are divided into four principal parts. It is the auxiliary verb combined with a main verb that makes all twelve tenses. Not only does the auxiliary verb help to show tense, but it also helps the main verb to show mood and voice. If you learn which auxiliary verbs go with each tense, you should not have problems with maintaining verb tense and voice in your writing. Problems in writing occur when students do not know the differences between the tenses and how they work together.

Common Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary	Emphatic	Modal
be, am, is, are, was, were, has, have, had	do, did, does	Should, could, would, might, may, must, can, will, shall, used to

I included the name of these helping verbs just for reference. Most often on state exams you do not need to identify what kind of verb is helping the main verb, only that it IS helping the main verb.

Before we get started in learning the four principal parts of the verb, we need to learn a little about the “specific” uses for some of these more confusing auxiliary verbs.

Will, Shall, Should	Both <i>shall</i> and <i>should</i> are seldom used in the English language. Shall is used in formal writing or to ask a polite question in the first-person. Should has been replaced with <i>would</i> but is still used on occasion in place of <i>ought to</i> . Since both were used for first-person only, most writers learned to use will for all voices—which is still acceptable as proper.
Do, Does, Did	All three of these auxiliary verbs are used to express the negative or to ask a question. When used as a question, the question will begin with the auxiliary verb followed by the subject and then the main verb. All are also used to add emphasis to a sentence. For example: <div style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;"> She always manages to hurt her mother’s feelings. She always does manage to hurt her mother’s feelings. </div>
Can, Could	Can is used to express the ability of knowing how to do something, the less formal form of making a request, or to express a theoretical possibility. Could is used to express an ability in the past or to request future permission, and to express a possibility that is contingent upon other circumstances. For example: If he studied harder, he could pass this course.
Can, May	According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, tenth edition, the age old argument of “which is correct” is over. BOTH are used to express or ask for permission. Can was used to distinguish ability or power and may was for asking permission. Now, either is acceptable in most cases. For formal requests, <i>may</i> is considered the more proper.

May, Might Confusion between these two auxiliary verbs occurs through lack of knowledge in the tenses. **May** is present tense and **might** is the past tense of *may*.

Used to, use to The auxiliary verb **used to** is used to express an action that took place in the past, but now that action no longer takes place. Again, confusion between the use of *used to* and *use to* occurs in the tense. When **used to** is combined with another auxiliary, such as *did*, the past tense is carried by the new auxiliary and the *-ed* is dropped by the old auxiliary—becoming **use to**. For example:

Didn't you use to go jogging every morning?
I **used to** have sneakers like those.