Use of Modals in Academic Writing

ESL Workshop
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Academic Writing

Asks you to:

- Analyze
- Synthesize
- Interpret
- Discuss
- Explore
- Expand
- Infer

To see how you respond to information
Interpretation vs. Fact

Interpret => make claims => offer ideas, possibilities, suggestions
(Present findings which may not be the only way to view something)

Fact = provable, certain, reproducible

When interpret, allow for the reader or other experts to draw conclusions too. Accept possibility of other positions.
Conclusions from a study

While the findings of this study seem in line with the studies that have come before there were a number of concerning issues. First, surveys should be administered to people acting as participants, not by friends posing as participants in order to diminish the number of “prank” responses. In life, some participants are pranksters, so is chalked up to individual differences. Second, it is more reliable to have another rater… To be more useful, a study of this nature needs further, and more prudent research. That notwithstanding, this study shows that pragmatic competence is important and relevant to course design.
Conclusions from a study

While the findings of this study seem in line with the studies that have come before there were a number of concerning issues. First, surveys should be administered to people acting as participants, not by friends posing as participants. This could diminish the number of “prank” responses. In life, some participants are pranksters, so this might be chalked up to individual differences. Second, it would be more reliable to have another rater… To be more useful, a study of this nature would need further, and more prudent research. That notwithstanding, this study is pedagogically interesting because teachers may decide instruction in pragmatic competence should be built into the course design.
Modals

- Modals = verbs that offer shades of meaning
- Modals express varying degrees of possibility or certainly about a statement
- Modals can improve your credibility

Should, may, might, must
Form: Modals

- Invariable – do not change in number

- Followed by base form of main verb
  (should do) or helping verb + main verb
  (should be doing)

- Never insert “to” between modal + verb
When used with “not”

1. Modal + not + verb  
   might not attend

2. Informal writing (emails) ➔ contract  
   can + not = can’t  
   will + not = won’t  
   would + not = wouldn’t  
   should + not = shouldn’t  
   could + not = couldn’t

3. Formal writing (proposals, papers, business letters) ➔ full form  
   can + not = cannot
Examining Your Position

Are you an expert?
Examine your evidence, your background to determine how committed you are to your interpretation.

Who would say each of the following:
1. The erosion may have been caused by the wind.
2. The erosion must have been caused by the wind.
Scale of Certainty

could/might  weak inference/ low possibility
may          stronger/perhaps, quite possibly
should       strong/ moderate possibility, probable
must         very strong/ certainly
will         strongest/ very certainly

It ______ rain today.

could/might
may
should
must
will
Lower End of Scale of Probability

might
may
won’t/ wouldn’t
can’t/couldn’t

low possibility
Impossibility
Past time

To express degrees of possibility about past time, use:

might, may, could, should, would

If the results had come in sooner, it might have made a difference.

vs.

If the results come tomorrow, it may make a difference.
Exercise

Use a modal verb in place of the underlined words and phrases. You might need to reconstruct the sentence rather than substitute words.

Example: It is certain that the sales tax is going to increase next year.
Answer: Sales tax will increase next year.

1. The scientist found it impossible to present her analysis because she had not collected all her data.
2. There is a low possibility that the shipment arrived yesterday afternoon.
3. It is quite likely that locally-grown tomatoes are available at the farmer’s market.
4. It is surely not possible that he is the person they hired!
5. It has rained for four days, so it is highly probably that the ground is very soggy.
6. He is likely to see benefits from his exercise program.
7. The winds are increasing at an alarming rate so there is a high probability that a tornado is on the way.

1. The scientist couldn’t present her analysis…
2. The shipment might have arrived yesterday afternoon.
3. Locally grown tomatoes should be available…
4. He can’t be the person they hired!
5. …so the ground must be very soggy.
6. He should see benefits from his exercise program…
7. …so a tornado must be on the way.

**Alternatives & Supplements**

**Suggest** – This study **suggests** that ….  

**Seem** – Cisneros **seems** to imply…

**Appear** – The results **appear** to show …

**Indicate** – This high passage rate **indicates** ….  

Use “I” – I **believe** this evidence points to ….  

“**While**…, …” sentences – **While I conclude** X, others might **conclude** Y.
Summary

- **Modals**: shade meaning

- Many contexts (requesting, recommending, expressing ability, academic writing)

- **Modal + Verb**
  - Never *modal + modal + verb* or *modal + to + verb*
Further Resources

4. Your writing handbook