

# Modals of Possibility: Speculation and Deduction

## INTERMEDIATE

Focus: May vs Might usage, Degrees of probability, Future possibility expressions, Adverb vs Verb phrase, Sentence structure and positioning, Spelling and punctuation, May not vs Might not, Couldn't vs Might not have, Logical impossibility

### 1. Present and Future Possibility (May, Might, Could)

We use **may**, **might**, and **could** to talk about things that are possible now or in the future. We are not 100% sure.

- **Structure:** Subject + Modal + Verb (base form).
- **Examples:**
  - *Where is Sarah?* She **might be** in the garden. (Present possibility)
  - *Take an umbrella.* It **could rain** later. (Future possibility)
  - *I'm not sure, but I **may go** to France next summer.* (Future possibility)

**Note:** In modern English, *may* and *might* are often interchangeable. *Might* is slightly less certain than *may*.

### 2. Maybe (Adverb) vs. May be (Verb)

This is a very common mistake. They sound the same but function differently.

- **Maybe (One word):** This is an **adverb**. It usually comes at the **start** of a sentence. It means "perhaps."
  - *Example: **Maybe** he is late.* (Synonym: *Perhaps* he is late.)
- **May be (Two words):** This is the modal verb **may** + the main verb **be**. It comes after the **subject**.
  - *Example: He **may be** late.* (Synonym: He *might be* late.)

### 3. Negative Speculation vs. Logical Impossibility

When we use negatives, the meaning changes significantly depending on the modal.

#### A. Possibility (It is possible that X will NOT happen)

Use **may not** or **might not**. (Do not use *could not* for uncertain future possibility).

- *I **might not come** to the party.* (There is a chance I will stay home.)
- *She **may not like** sushi.* (It is possible she dislikes it.)

#### B. Logical Impossibility (It is IMPOSSIBLE)

Use **can't** or **couldn't**. This is a **deduction**, not just a guess. You are 99% sure it is **not** true.

- *That **can't be** John. John is in Australia right now!* (It is impossible).
- *It **couldn't be** true.* (Strong deduction).

### 4. Question Forms

We rarely use *May* or *Might* to ask questions about probability (e.g., "Might it rain?" is very old-fashioned). Instead, we use:

- **Could** + Subject + Verb? -> *Could it rain later?*
- **Do you think** + Subject + **will/might**...? -> *Do you think she might come?*

# Practice Exercises

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**Instruction:** Complete the sentences using the correct modal verb or phrase based on the context cues.

- For **Negatives**, use the cue (not/verb). Pay attention to whether it is just **possible** (might not) or **impossible** (couldn't/can't).
- For **Maybe vs. May be**, choose the correct spelling based on the cue (maybe / may be).
- For **Questions**, use the correct word order.

1. Take your coat with you. It \_\_\_\_\_ (could/turn) cold later tonight.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (maybe / may be) we should wait for them here.
3. She \_\_\_\_\_ (not/come) to work tomorrow because she isn't feeling well, but she isn't sure yet.
4. That story \_\_\_\_\_ (not/be) true! I saw him yesterday and he was fine. It is logically impossible.
5. Where \_\_\_\_\_ (you/stay) when you visit London? Have you decided?
6. Look at those dark clouds. It \_\_\_\_\_ (may/rain) soon.
7. Don't buy that shirt. It \_\_\_\_\_ (not/fit) you, and it's very expensive to return.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ (maybe / may be) the shop is closed today. It is Sunday, after all.
9. That woman looks exactly like Beyonce, but it \_\_\_\_\_ (not/be) her. Beyonce is performing in Tokyo tonight!
10. \_\_\_\_\_ (it/could/be) a mistake in the system? Please check again.
11. There \_\_\_\_\_ (maybe / may be) a delay with the trains because of the snow.
12. I am worried about the test. I \_\_\_\_\_ (not/pass) if I don't study harder.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ (do/you/think) they might arrive early?
14. We \_\_\_\_\_ (may/visit) the museum if we have enough time.
15. He is very busy. He \_\_\_\_\_ (not/have) time to see us today.

## Answer Key

1. could turn (or *might turn / may turn*)
2. Maybe
3. might not come (or *may not come*)
4. couldn't be (or *can't be*)
5. could you stay (or *might you stay*) / Note: "*Where are you staying*" is also possible, but "*could*" fits the modal topic.
6. may rain (or *might rain / could rain*)
7. might not fit (or *may not fit*)
8. Maybe
9. can't be (or *couldn't be*)
10. Could it be
11. may be
12. might not pass (or *may not pass*)
13. Do you think
14. may visit (or *might visit*)
15. might not have (or *may not have*)