Mastering Modals for IELTS Writing

What's This About?

Modals are small words with a big impact. Words like 'can', 'should', 'must', and 'might' help express tone, obligation, permission, and possibility. They're essential in IELTS Writing because they allow you to present arguments carefully, show degrees of certainty, and suggest solutions politely.

This pack will teach you how to use modals naturally and accurately in your essays. You'll learn what each modal does, how to avoid common mistakes, and how to match the tone of your writing to the task. Whether you're giving advice, offering suggestions, or expressing doubt, mastering modals will help you sound more fluent and academic.

IELTS Scoring Impact

Modals affect both your Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range scores. Overusing 'can' or misusing forms like 'musts' or 'he doesn't can' signals a low level of grammar control. Band 6 and above requires flexible and accurate use of modal verbs, especially in Task 2 when presenting opinions or discussing consequences.

High-level writers use modals for nuance. For example, 'This could reduce emissions' sounds more balanced than 'This will reduce emissions.' The ability to show possibility, suggestion, or necessity—without sounding too direct—is part of what separates Band 6 from Band 7 and above.

Common Mistakes

Students often make three main types of errors with modals:
1. Incorrect formation (e.g., 'He cans', 'It musts be', 'He doesn't can').

2. Overusing 'can' for all situations, even when another modal would show more precision.
3. Using modals without matching the correct verb tense, such as 'It could helped'.

Another problem is tonal mismatch. For example, saying 'Governments must ban smoking' sounds too strong for IELTS unless you're giving a very firm opinion. In many cases, 'should' or 'could' would be more appropriate. Using the wrong modal can make your writing feel aggressive, unclear, or grammatically weak.

Rewrite Rules

Follow these rules to use modals effectively and naturally:
1. Never add 's' to a modal: it's 'He can', not 'He cans'.
2. Use the base form of the verb after all modals: 'should do', 'might increase', 'must improve'.
3. Choose modals based on tone:
   - Can = ability or possibility
   - Could = polite possibility or suggestion
   - Should = advice or recommendation
   - Must = strong obligation
   - Might = uncertainty
4. Use modals to soften predictions or claims: 'This may help reduce traffic' sounds more balanced than 'This helps traffic'.

Control, not complexity, is the goal. Use modals where they fit logically and naturally—not just to sound academic.

Comparison Examples

Band 5:
Some people can smoke in public. It is bad. The government can stop it. People can be angry.

Band 7:
Smoking in public places can negatively affect others, and many believe it should be restricted. Governments could introduce clearer regulations to manage this issue, although some people might feel their freedom is being limited.

The Band 7 version shows varied modals: 'can', 'should', 'could', and 'might', each chosen to reflect a different level of certainty or recommendation. This creates a more thoughtful and persuasive tone.

Rewrite Practice

Rewrite the following paragraph by replacing flat or incorrect modal usage with a range of modals that show advice, possibility, and opinion:

"People can lose jobs. It can make problems. The government can help them. They can find new work."

Try to show more variety and appropriate tone using modals like should, might, could, or must.

Mini Quiz: Spot the Correct Modal Use

Which sentence uses a modal verb correctly?

A. He cans play the guitar well.
B. The solution musts be expensive.
C. They should consider alternative options.

Strategy Add-ons

- Learn modal tone by grouping them: advice (should), possibility (might, could), obligation (must), ability (can), and probability (will, would).
- Read model essays and highlight every modal verb. Ask: why was it used here? What tone is it creating?
- Replace flat verbs in your own essays with more specific modal phrases. Instead of 'People do not like pollution', try 'People might be concerned about rising pollution levels.'

Strong modal use makes your ideas feel more thoughtful and well-balanced—essential for higher Task 2 scores.

Paragraph Upgrade Exercise

Band 5:
Many people can drive to work. They can be late. The traffic can be bad. The city can fix this.

Band 7:
Although many people are able to drive to work, heavy traffic may cause delays and frustration. To address this, the city could invest in better public transport systems, which might reduce the overall number of private vehicles on the road.

Get in Touch

Modals help you control tone, express nuance, and build professional-sounding arguments. If you're stuck repeating the same ones or making tense errors, we'll show you how to build confident, flexible grammar with natural structure.

👉 Book a 30-minute session at: https://ieltsjack.com