

MODAL VERBS - DIGITAL RULES

Simple rules for permissions, possibility, advice and obligation

Choose the modal verb by asking: Is it possible, allowed, necessary, recommended, or optional?

CAN

ability / permission

Use CAN when something is possible, someone is able to do it, or permission is given.

Example: Employees can access the system remotely.

MAY

possibility / formal permission

Use MAY when something is possible but not certain. It can also be used for formal permission.

Example: Unknown attachments may contain malware.

MUST

strong obligation

Use MUST when a rule is very important or something is necessary.

Example: Employees must protect confidential information.

MUSTN'T

prohibition

Use MUSTN'T when something is not allowed. It means: Do not do this.

Example: You mustn't share your password.

SHOULD

advice / recommendation

Use SHOULD when something is a good idea or the recommended action.

Example: Users should enable two-factor authentication.

DON'T HAVE TO

no obligation

Use DON'T HAVE TO when something is optional. You can do it, but it is not necessary.

Example: You don't have to attend the meeting in person.

IMPORTANT: MUSTN'T vs DON'T HAVE TO

MUSTN'T = it is prohibited

You mustn't share your password.

= Sharing it is not allowed.

DON'T HAVE TO = it is optional

You don't have to attend in person.

= You may attend online instead.