Modal Auxiliaries Handout

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| Auxiliary + simple form of verb | Can, could, may, might, should, had better, must, will, would |

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| Auxiliary + to + simple form of verb | Have to, have got to, be able to, ought to |

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| Ability | Can (present/future),  could (past) |  |
|  | Negative | Cannot = can’t  Could not = couldn’t |

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| Possibility | May, might | present or future possibility |
|  |  | Negative: may not/might not (no contraction) |
|  | Maybe | adverb; means “possibly”; goes at the beginning of a sentence. |
|  | Could | Present or future possibility; NOT used as the past tense of can |

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| Permission | May, can | Used to give permission |
|  |  | May is more formal than can |
|  | May not, cannot | Used to deny permission |

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| Polite Question | May I, Could I, Can I | Ask for permission or agreement |
|  |  | Can I is less formal than May I or Could I |
|  |  | “Please” can come at the end of the question or it can be omitted |
|  | Would you, Could you, Will you, Can you | Ask for help or cooperation |
|  |  | Would and could are generally more polite than will and can |
|  |  | May is not used **you** is the subject of a polite question |

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| Advice | Should, ought to | “This is a good idea; this is good advice.” |
|  |  | Should + simple form of verb (no to) |
|  |  | Ought + **to** + simple form of verb |
|  |  | Negative: should + not = shouldn’t |
|  |  | Question: should + subject + main verb |
|  |  | The use of **maybe** with should “softens” advice. |
|  | Had better | Same meaning as should and ought to |
|  |  | Has more of a sense of urgency. It often implies warning about possible bad consequences. |
|  |  | Negative: had better not |

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| Necessity | Have to, have got to, must | Expresses that something is necessary |
|  |  | **Have** **to** used more in everyday speech and writing |
|  |  | **Must** is used in written instructions or when adults talk to children |
|  |  | **Have to** usually used in questions with a form of **do** |
|  |  | Past form of have to, have got to, and must is **had to** |
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| Lack of Necessity | Do not have to (don’t/doesn’t have to) | Something is not necessary |

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| Prohibition | Must not | Means “do not do this!” |
|  |  | Must + not = mustn’t (pronounced “mussn’t”; the first t is silent.) |

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| Making Logical Conclusions | Must | Expresses a logical conclusion or “best guess” (NOT the same as necessity) |
|  | Must not | Negative logical conclusion |

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| Tag Questions | Can, could, will, would, should |  |
|  | Have to, has to, had to | Used with forms of **do** |

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| Giving Instructions: Imperatives | (Give commands, make polite requests, and give directions) | Difference is speaker’s tone and use of please |
|  |  | **Please** can come at the beginning or end of a **request** |
|  |  | Use the simple form of a verb |
|  |  | **You** is implied (not written or spoken) |
|  | Negative form | Don’t + simple form of a verb |

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| Making Suggestions | Let’s, Why don’t | Let’s = let us |
|  |  | **Why don’t you** used to make friendly suggestions or give friendly advice |

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| Stating Preferences | Prefer, Like…Better, Would Rather | Prefer + noun+ **to** + noun |
|  |  | Prefer + -ing verb + to + -ing verb |
|  |  | Like + noun + **better than** + noun |
|  |  | Like + -**ing verb** + **better than** + -ing verb |
|  |  | Would rather + simple form of verb |
|  |  | Than + simple form of verb |
|  | Contraction | Would = ‘d (ex. I’d = I would) |
|  | Polite question (offer a choice) | **Would rather** can be followed by **or** |