

Modals Exercise: Logical Probability Modals

The weight of evidence

As you learned in class, when we don't regard something as a fact

- we use the modal 'must' if we have evidence that gives us an attitude of near certainty,
- we use the periphrastic modal 'be probably' for evidence that makes us think our guess is more than possible but less than certain,
- and we use 'may,' 'might,' 'could' or 'can' when the evidence is not very strong.

You will also remember that we use 'be -ing' in regards to actions that are happening at present or are planned for the future.

Here is something to exercise your skill in weighing evidence for determining the proper modal. First, read this entire conversation. Then complete each sentence by using the lightweight 'may' or 'might,' or the heavy-weight 'must' with the word in parentheses. **(In this exercise, don't use the middleweight 'probably.')** Be sure to use the correct verb tense (either 'is/does' or 'be -ing'), and use the negative form if the context requires it.

Remember to choose the modal only according to the weight of the evidence in this context (the words in this dialog). Don't add any weight from your own imagination or experience. And do not use the middleweight 'probably.'

After you complete all of the items, check the answer key.

- ASSISTANT Good morning. Mr. MacStein's office.
- CALLER Good morning. Can I speak with Mr. MacStein, please?
- 1 ASSISTANT I'm sorry, but Mr. MacStein's not here right now. It's 11:59 so he _____ in the classroom still. (be)
- CALLER No, he's not there. I just looked.
- 2 ASSISTANT Well, he told me had to do some copying today. He _____ it right now in the Department office. (do)
- CALLER I'm sorry to bother you, but could you tell me what his new book is about? I mean the one he's writing now.
- 3 ASSISTANT What's his new book about? I have no idea! But it _____ about students' cruelty to teachers, because that's already been sent to the publisher. (be)
- CALLER Do you mind if I ask when he will finish it?
- 4 ASSISTANT When will he finish it? I certainly don't know. But he _____ it ready for next year's book fair in Germany. (get)
- CALLER Well, you've been very kind. Thank you very much. I'll call back again later.
- 5 ASSISTANT Oh, wait a minute! I think I hear his voice down the hall. He _____ right now! (come in)
- CALLER That's wonderful. I'll just hold on a minute, if you don't mind.
- 6 ASSISTANT . . . Oh, I'm sorry. It wasn't him. It's the Department assistant. She told me he left the office just a few minutes ago. He _____ out to lunch. (go)
- CALLER Thank you so much. I'll call back in an hour or so.

ANSWERS

As you see, the only item that has strong enough evidence for 'must' is #3. In the other items, the evidence in the dialog is not strong enough for 'must.'

1. might be
2. might be doing
3. mustn't be
4. might be getting
5. might be coming
6. might be going