

Modal Verbs

I. INTRODUCTION

Look at the following sentences:

He's going home.
He's doing it.

These are simple declarative statements of fact. Often, however, one wants to add something to simple statements of this kind:

He *must* go home.
He *can* do it.

As you can see, you can do this by adding verbs like *must* or *can*. German has a set of such verbs and they are called *modal auxiliaries*, or *modals*, for short. They are treated as a group because they all affect sentence structure the same way. The following table shows you the German modals and their English counterparts:

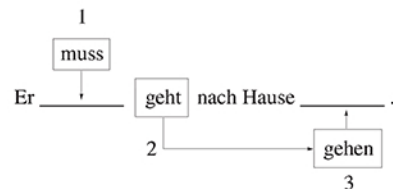
können	Er kann es machen.	He <i>can (is able to)</i> do it.
müssen	Er muss es machen.	He <i>must (has to)</i> do it.
dürfen	Er darf es machen.	He <i>may</i> do it.
wollen	Er will es machen.	He <i>wants to</i> do it.
sollen	Er soll es machen.	He's <i>supposed to</i> do it.
mögen	Das mag wohl sein.	That <i>may</i> well be.

II. STRUCTURE OF GERMAN SENTENCES WITH MODAL AUXILIARIES

The following sentence is a simple declarative statement that *does not* use a modal:

Er geht nach Hause.

When the modal **muss** is added to the sentence, the following changes take place:



With the modal added, the sentence looks like this:

Er **muss** nach Hause **gehen**.

Muss...gehen is a two-word verb form called a *modal expression*. Modal expressions consist of a conjugated form of the modal (**muss**) and an unconjugated form called a *dependent infinitive* (**gehen** in the preceding example).

What has happened?

1. As a conjugated verb, **muss** is in second (verb) position in the new sentence.
2. The conjugated verb **geht** has moved to the end of the sentence and has become a *dependent infinitive*, **gehen**.

RULE: Unconjugated verb forms—infinitives and past participles—always occupy final position in simple sentences.

III. OMISSION OF ZU IN MODAL EXPRESSIONS

He must go home. He <i>has to</i> go home.	Er muss nach Hause gehen.
He can do it. He <i>is able to</i> do it.	Er kann es machen.

In true English modal expressions (He *must* go home. He *can* do it.), there is never a *to* before the dependent infinitive. Similarly, German never uses **zu** before infinitives in modal expressions.

English, however, makes much more common use of *equivalents of modals* that *do* use the word *to*: He *has to* go home, He *is able to* do it. German almost always uses true modals (**müssen**, **können**, **dürfen**, etc.), which means that **zu** is not used.

G. Forms of German modals (summary)

1. Present tense stems of modals

Five of the German modals have two present tense *stems*: one stem for the infinitive and plural forms, and a different stem for the singular.

INFINITIVE	PLURAL STEM	SINGULAR STEM
müssen	müss–	muss–
können	könn–	kann–
dürfen	dürf–	darf–
mögen	mög–	mag–
wollen	woll–	will–

The one remaining modal has only *one* present tense stem:

INFINITIVE	PLURAL STEM	SINGULAR STEM
sollen	soll–	soll–

2. Present tense forms

The present tense endings of the modals are unusual: the 1st and 3rd person singular *take no endings*, i.e., they use only the stem:

ich	kann	—	wir	könn	en
du	kann	st	ihr	könn	t
er	kann	—	sie	könn	en

VI. OMISSION OF INFINITIVES IN MODAL EXPRESSIONS

He <i>must</i> go home.	Er muss nach Hause gehen. Er muss nach Hause.
He <i>can</i> do it.	Er kann es machen. Er kann es.

In German the infinitive may be omitted from modal expressions when:

1. a goal or destination is stated or implied in the sentence:

Ich muss nach Hause **gehen**. Ich muss nach Hause.

2. the idea of *to do* (**machen, tun**) is present.

Er kann das **machen**. Er kann das.

3. the context makes the infinitive repetitious:

Muss er heute zu Hause **bleiben**? Ja, er muss.
(Does he have to stay home today? Yes, he has to.)

NOTE: Example 3 parallels English usage; examples 1 and 2 do not.