

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:

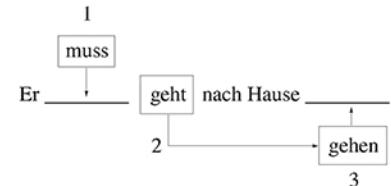
können	Er kann es machen.	He <i>can</i> (<i>is able to</i>) do it.
müssen	Er muss es machen.	He <i>must</i> (<i>has to</i>) do it.
dürfen	Er darf es machen.	He <i>may</i> do it.
wollen	Er will es machen.	He <i>wants to</i> do it.
sollen	Er soll es machen.	He's <i>supposed to</i> do it.
mögen	Das mag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

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 *has to* go home.

He can do it.
He *is able to* do it.

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	könñ-	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 können	en
du kannst	st	ihr könnt	t
er kann	—	sie können	en

VII. OMISSION OF INFINITIVES IN MODAL EXPRESSIONS

He *must* go home.

Er **muss** nach Hause gehen.

Er **muss** nach Hause.

He *can* 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.