

Lesson Plan: Modal verbs in academic writing

Level: Upper-intermediate/advanced (B2-C1)

Time: 90 minutes (can be shortened to 60)

Context: Academic writing (essays, reports, research discussions)

Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand how modal verbs express **certainty, probability, caution, and obligation** in academic writing
- Distinguish between **strong vs. weak claims**
- Use modal verbs appropriately to **hedge arguments** and **sound academic**
- Edit writing to improve tone and accuracy using modals

Target language

Modal verbs commonly used in academic writing:

- **may / might / could**
- **can / cannot**
- **must**
- **should**
- **would**

1. Warm-up: academic tone awareness (10 minutes)

Activity: compare the sentences

Write these pairs on the board:

1.

A: *This method is effective.*

B: *This method **may** be effective.*

2.

A: *This result proves the theory.*

B: *This result **could** support the theory.*

Discussion questions:

- Which sentence sounds **more academic**?
- Which sentence is **more cautious**?
- Why do academics avoid being too certain?

→ Elicit the concept of **hedging** (being careful and precise).

2. Presentation: Function of modal verbs in academic writing (15 minutes)

Key idea

Modal verbs help writers:

- Avoid overgeneralization
- Show respect for other research
- Express degrees of certainty

Board summary

Function	Modal Verbs	Example
Strong certainty	must	This result must indicate a flaw in the model.
Moderate certainty	should	The findings should improve accuracy.
Possibility	may / might / could	This theory may explain the results.
General ability	can	This method can be applied widely.
Hypothetical	would	This approach would require further testing

3. Focus on hedging vs. overstatement (15 minutes)

Guided analysis

Give students a short academic paragraph with **overly strong claims**:

Social media causes poor academic performance. Students lose focus and fail exams.

Task:

Students work in pairs to **soften the claims** using modal verbs.

Possible revised version:

*Social media **may** contribute to poorer academic performance. Students **can** lose focus, which **could** affect exam results.*

Feedback: Discuss why the second version is more appropriate.

4. Grammar focus: meaning differences between modals (15 minutes)

Mini-lecture + examples

Must → logical conclusion (based on evidence)

- *The data is consistent; the model **must** be reliable.*

May / Might / Could → uncertainty / possibility

- *The discrepancy **might** be due to sampling errors.*

Should → expectation, not certainty

- *These measures **should** reduce bias.*

Can → general truth or ability

- *Peer review **can** improve research quality.*

Concept check questions (CCQs)

- Is *may* 100% certain? → No
- Is *must* an opinion without evidence? → No

5. Controlled practice: error correction (15 minutes)

Activity: Academic editing

Students correct sentences that are **too strong or inappropriate**.

Example:

1. *This experiment proves that the hypothesis is correct.*
2. *Students will improve writing skills if they read more.*

Possible answers:

- *This experiment **may** suggest that the hypothesis is correct.*
- *Students **may** improve writing skills if they read more.*

Students justify their choices.

6. Semi-controlled practice: sentence transformation (10 minutes)

Students rewrite sentences using the modal in brackets.

1. *The policy is ineffective.* (might)
2. *This approach improves results.* (could)
3. *The theory is wrong.* (may not)

Peer check answers.

7. Freer practice: academic writing task (15 minutes)

Task

Students write a **short academic paragraph (80–120 words)** on a topic such as:

- Online learning
- Climate change
- Artificial intelligence in education

Requirements:

- Use **at least 4 different modal verbs**
- Avoid absolute claims

Students exchange paragraphs and underline modal verbs used.

8. Review & reflection (5 minutes)

Class discussion:

- Why is certainty risky in academic writing?
- Which modal verbs help you sound more objective?

Exit ticket:

Write one sentence using a modal verb to express **possibility**, not certainty.

Optional homework

Revise a previous essay by identifying strong claims and adding modal verbs to hedge appropriately