

Might and may

Introduction



That might be the solution to our problem.

Definition

May and might are modal auxiliary verbs with different uses.

Construction

affirmative	subject + 'may/might' + bare infinitive	I might/may go.
negative	subject + 'may/might' + not + bare infinitive	I might/may not attend.
interrogative	'may/might' + subject + bare infinitive	Might/may I go? ('might' is very formal in questions and rarely used.)

Note that like other modal auxiliaries, may and might have no infinitive and we use the same form with 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it', 'we' and 'they'. 'Do' is not used to form negative or interrogative sentences.

Uses

Use	Example
Polite requests	May I borrow your pen please?
Offers	May I help you? Might I take your coat? [very formal, rarely used]
Possibility now (See note 1. below about interrogative forms.)	The report may be on the printer. Susan might be in the canteen as she is not in her office.
Possibility in the future	It may rain later so take your umbrella. John might speak at the conference instead of David.
Permission	May I use your telephone? Might is very rarely used. You may still hear it on very formal occasions or read it in literature.
Might is also used for criticism or reproach.	You might help me rather than watching me struggle!

Notes

1. Rather than using might in questions about possibility, it is more common to use 'Do you think...?' For example:

"Do you think you'll go to the conference?"
is better than... Might you go to the conference?
"Do you think that John has a new girlfriend?" is better than... Might John have a new girlfriend?

We use could for questions about possibility:

May John have sent it in the post instead of by email?

Could John have sent it in the post instead of by email?

2. If there is a chance that may could be understood as permission, then we use might. For example:

Susan may go to the party. [permission or possibility]
Susan might go to the party. [possibility]

3. If you are in doubt about which modal to use:

Use can to express ability.
Use might to express possibility.
Use may to ask for or express permission.

'May', 'might' or 'could'?

When talking about possibility, might/may and could are not always interchangeable because could has two meanings:

1) 'Can achieve - able to be done or achieved, or able to exist'

The three words are not interchangeable when we are talking about possibility in this way:

'We could play tennis today' means that the right conditions exist - we have enough time, we have a tennis court nearby etc. We have the ability to play if we want to.

'We might/may play tennis today' means that we are considering playing tennis but we are not sure.

2) 'Not certain - that might or might not happen'
Here, they are interchangeable. In these sentences, we could also use 'maybe' or 'perhaps'.

For example, the following sentences all have the same meaning - there is a possibility that John is in the boardroom:

John could be in the boardroom.
John might be in the boardroom.
John may be in the boardroom.
Maybe John is in the boardroom.
Perhaps John is in the boardroom.

Different levels of certainty or doubt can be expressed by changes in the tone of voice used.

The present continuous

Might and may can also be followed by the present continuous for possibility now or in the future. For example:

They may be having lunch now; it's half past twelve.

Gilbert might not be driving to the airport tomorrow - his car isn't reliable at the moment.

When using might and may with the simple tenses, it is easy to see if the speaker is referring to the present or the future. For example:

Susan might be in the canteen. [present]

John might speak at the conference. [future]

With the continuous, it might not be clear. For example:

John might be speaking at the conference. [present or future?]

If necessary, we add a time reference.

John might be speaking at the conference at the moment.
John might be speaking at the conference later.

Examples



Do you think that one might suit me?



They might be finishing the meeting soon so I'd better finish my coffee.



We might have to put an extra fire door here to comply with regulations.



May I recommend the dish of the day?

Some common expressions

Expression	Meaning	Example
Pigs might fly.	Used to say something is very unlikely	"I might work on that report after dinner tonight." "Yes and pigs might fly."
'Might/may as well' (+ bare infinitive)	Indicates that it is better to do something than not - it shows no strong preference.	"Shall we go to the office party?" "We might as well; there's nothing else to do tonight."
Come what may.	Whatever happens.	Come what may, I'm going to finish this report by the end of the week.
Be that as it may.	Even so/nevertheless.	Sorry to hear of your troubles but, be that as it may, I still need you to be in the office on time.
subject + 'may well have' + past participle	It is probable that something has been done but I don't remember.	"You said you wouldn't be here tonight." "I may well have said that but here I am."
You may well ask.	To say that you want the same question to be answered.	"Where are Susan and Trevor? They were supposed to be here earlier." "You may well ask. They left home over an hour ago."

See also

Could

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