

# 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 attend.**

**negative:**      subject + 'may/might' + **not** + **bare infinitive**      **I might/may not attend.**

**interrogative:** 'may/might' + **subject** + **bare infinitive**      **Might you attend? May I help you?**

**[**'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	<b>May</b> I borrow your pen please?
Offers	<b>May</b> I help you? <b>Might</b> I take your coat? [very formal, rarely used]
Possibility now [See note 1. below about interrogative forms.]	The report <b>may</b> be on the printer. Susan <b>might</b> be in the canteen as she is not in her office.
Possibility in the future	It <b>may</b> rain later so take your umbrella. John <b>might</b> speak at the conference instead of David.
Permission	<b>May</b> I use your telephone?
<b>Might</b> is <u>very rarely used</u> . You may still hear it on very formal occasions or read it in literature.	
<b>Might</b> is also used for criticism or reproach.	You <b>might</b> 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.

## 'Might'/'may' or 'could' for possibility?

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 all 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?



"**May** I have one more? You certainly **may** not!"

## Some common expressions

Expression	Meaning	Example
Pigs <b>might</b> fly.	Used to say something is very unlikely	"I <b>might</b> work on that report after dinner tonight." "Yes and pigs <b>might</b> fly."
' <b>Might/may as well</b> ' (+ 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 <b>might</b> as well; there's nothing else to do tonight."
Come what <b>may</b> .	Whatever happens.	Come what <b>may</b> , I'm going to finish this report by the end of the week.
Be that as it <b>may</b> .	Even so/nevertheless.	Sorry to hear of your troubles but, be that as it <b>may</b> , 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 <b>may well</b> 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 early."  
"You **may** well ask. They left home over an hour ago."

## See also

### Could



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Last update: 2023/02/14 14:21

