

# Should, had better, ought to

## Introduction



You **should** try this - it's delicious!

## Definition

**Should** is a modal auxiliary verb which has different uses.

## Construction

affirmative: subject + 'should' + **bare infinitive**      I **should** go.

negative: subject + 'should' + 'not' + **bare infinitive**      I **shouldn't** go.

interrogative: 'should' + subject + **bare infinitive**      **Should** I go?

**Note that** like other modal auxiliaries, **should** has 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	Examples
Giving and asking for advice	You <b>should</b> go to the doctor's - you've been coughing for a week. You <b>shouldn't</b> work at weekends - you need a break. <b>Should</b> I phone or email him?

<b>To talk about the best or right thing to do (in one's opinion)</b>	Banks <b>should</b> tell customers in advance about charges. We <b>should</b> discuss this with the client before making a decision. <b>Should</b> we have the meeting in the boardroom or your office?
<b>Deduction</b>	That <b>should</b> be the postman at the door; he's usually here about this time.
<b>Expectation - this is similar to 'will' for predictions but less certain</b>	She <b>should</b> do well in her new job; she has all the right experience. It <b>shouldn't</b> rain this afternoon so I won't take an umbrella.
<b>The past tense of 'shall'</b> [See also <b>reported speech</b> .]	She wondered if she <b>should</b> phone him or send an email.
<b>As an alternative to 'would' when</b> (i) giving an opinion (ii) in <b>second conditional</b> sentences	I <b>should</b> think that's a good restaurant - let's come back later. If I won the lottery, I <b>should</b> give up work and travel round the world.
<b>As an extra word in <b>first conditional</b> sentences or as an alternative to 'if' when these are inverted</b>	If I ( <b>should</b> ) see him, I'll give him your message. <b>Should</b> I see him, I'll give him your message.

These are all used in the same way but with different levels of certainty.  
For example, someone hears a knock on the door at the time that the postman usually arrives and says:

That **should** be the postman. [It's probably the postman but it could be someone else.]

That **must** be the postman. [I'm certain it's the postman but there's a possibility that it isn't.]

That'll be the postman. [I have no doubt at all that it's the postman.]

## Had better

'Had better' can also be used to talk about the best or right thing to do and is a little

stronger than **should**.

It's late now - I think we'd **better** postpone the meeting until tomorrow.

affirmative:	subject + 'had better' + <b>bare infinitive</b>	<b>We'd better go.</b>
negative:	subject + 'had better' + 'not' <b>bare infinitive</b>	<b>We'd better not go.</b>
interrogative:	had' + subject 'better' + <b>bare infinitive</b>	<b>Had we better go?</b>

### Note that

1. We use it to speak about specific rather than general situations.

You have an exam tomorrow so you'd **better**/should go to bed early tonight.

When you are taking an exam, you **should** go to bed early the night before.

2. 'Had better' is preferred for a warning or when there is some urgency.

"I'm going home now." "You'd **better** not. There's a lot more work to do!"  
Oh, no! It's starting to rain. We'd **better** run!

3. In the interrogative, **should** is much more common.

## Ought to

**Ought to** has the same function as a modal auxiliary verb and has different uses.

### Construction

affirmative:	subject + 'ought to' + <b>bare infinitive</b>	You <b>ought to</b> go.
negative:	subject + 'ought' + 'not' + 'to' + <b>bare infinitive</b>	You <b>oughtn't to</b> go.
interrogative:	1. 'did' + subject + 'ought to' + bare infinitive	Did you <b>ought to</b> go?
	2. 'ought' + subject + 'to' + <b>bare infinitive</b>	<b>Ought</b> you <b>to</b> go?

[More formal]

**Note that we use the same form with 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'it', 'we' and 'they'.**

**Ought to** has the same meaning as **should** for advice and talking about expectations or the right thing to do.

## Notes

1. **Ought to** is more common in conversation than in writing but, generally, is used less than **should**.
2. **Should** is preferred when we talk about what an outside authority believes is the right thing:  
The instructions say that Part A **should** be connected to Part B.
3. In the interrogative, **should** is much more common. With **ought to**, we are more likely to add the verb 'to think'.

Do you think we **ought to** tell him? ✓ **Ought we to** tell him?

4. The negative forms are also rarely used. **Should** is preferred.
5. **Ought to** can also be followed by the **present continuous**.

He **ought to** be wearing protective clothing.

## Examples



How **should** I prepare the corn?



The government **should** reduce spending.



**Should** I open it now or wait until my birthday?



My bus leaves at six so I **should** be there by seven.



The final contract **should** be ready for you to sign in two days.



He asked me if we **should** meet at the station or the airport.



We're running out of food - you'd **better** go and get some more.



Where are my keys? They **ought to** be in my bag but I can't find them.



You **ought to** look for another job - you'll never get promoted here.

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