

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 should go to the doctor's - you've been coughing for a week. You shouldn't work at weekends - you need a break. Should I phone or email him?

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

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



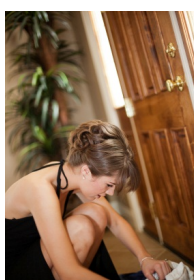
The final contract **should** be ready for you to sign in two days.



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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