12 **may** and **can** for permission and possibility

Permission

127   **may** used for permission: forms

may for all persons in the present and future.
might in the conditional and after verbs in a past tense.
Negative: may not/mayn't, might not/mightn't
Interrogative: may I? might I? etc.
Negative interrogative: may I not/mayn't I? might I not/mightn't I? etc,
Other forms are supplied by allow, be allowed.
may is followed by the bare infinitive.

128   can used for permission: forms
can for all persons in the present and future.
could for past and conditional.
Negative: cannot/can't, could not/couldn't
Interrogative: can I? could I? etc.
Negative interrogative: can I not/can't I? could I not/couldn't I? etc.
Other forms are supplied by allow, be allowed.
can is followed by the bare infinitive.

129   **may** and **can** used for permission in the present or future

A   First person

I/we can is the most usual form:
I can take a day off whenever I want. I/we may meaning 'I/we have permission to . . .' is possible:
I may leave the office as soon as I haw finished. But this is not a very common construction and it would be much more usual to say:
I can leave/I'm allowed to leave . . . I/we may/might is a little more usual in indirect speech:
'You may leave when you 've finished,' he says/said =
He says we may leave/He said we might leave . . . But in colloquial speech we would use can/could:
He says we can lease/He said we could leave.

B   Second person

Here may is chiefly used when the speaker is giving permission. You may park here means 'I give you permission to park'. It does not normally mean 'The police etc. allow you to park' or 'You have a right to park'.
can can be used as an informal alternative to may here. But it can also be used to express the idea of having permission. *You can park here* can mean *'I allow it/The police allow it/You have aright to park here'*.
Similarly You can take two books home with you can mean 'I allow it/The library allows it' and You can't eat sandwiches in the library can mean 'I don't allow it/The librarian doesn't allow it' or 'It isn't the proper thing to do'.
could can be used when there is an idea of condition:
Why don't you ring him? You can/could use my phone.
could is also used in indirect speech introduced by a verb in a past tense:
He said I could use his phone.

C   Third person ;': may can be used as in B above when the speaker is giving permission:
He may fake my car. (I give him permission to take it.)
They may phone the office and reverse the charges. (I give them permission.)
But it is chiefly used in impersonal statements concerning authority and <!•' permission:
In certain circumstances a police officer may (•= has the right to) ask wк"' a driver to take a breath test.

If convicted, an accused person may (= has the right to) appeal. y ,   SCRABBLE RULES: No letter
may be moved after it has been played.
informal English can/can't would be used:
He can take the car.
They can phone the office.
A police officer can ask a driver . . .
An accused person can appeal.
No letter can be moved . . .

130   **could** or **was/were allowed to** for permission in the past

could can also express general permission in the past:
On Sundays we could (.= were allowed to) stay up late.
When a particular action was permitted and performed we use
was/were allowed instead of **could**:
I had a visa so I was allowed to cross the frontier.
Wuldn't however can be used a little more widely than could:
We couldn 't bring our dog into the restaurant. ll'The opposite of this would be:
We were allowed to bring etc.
For perfect tenses and passives allowed must be used:
*Since his accident he hasn't been allowed to drive. As a child he had been allowed to do exactly
what he liked.*
(For might/could in indirect speech, see 129 A.)

131   Requests for permission (see also 283)

A can I?, could I?, may I?, might I? are all possible and can be used for the present or future,
can I? is the most informal. could I? is the most generally useful of the four, as it can express
both formal and informal requests.
may I? is a little more forma) than could I? but can also be used for both types of requests.
might I? is more diffident than may I? and hdicates greater uncertainty about the answer.
B The negative interrogative forms can't I? and couldn't I? are used ta show that the speaker
hopes for an affirmative answer:
*Can't I stay up till the end of the programme? Couldn't I pay by cheque? may and might are not
used in this way,*
C Answers to can I/could I requests will normally be:
Yes, you can.   Yes, of course (you can).   No, you can't. Affirmative answers to may I/might
I requests are normally:
Yes, you may.   Yes. of course (you may). For a negative answer No, you may not is
possible but it would normally be replaced by a milder expression:
I'd rather you didn't.   I'm afraid not.
D Questions about permission are expressed by can or am/is/are
allowed to in the present and by could or was/were allowed to in
the past:
Can Tom use the car whenever he likes?
Is Tom allowed to use the car . . . ?
Could students choose what they wanted to study?
Were students allowed to choose . . . ?

Possibility

132   **may/might** for possibility

A   Form
may/might for present and future.
might in the conditional and after verbs in the past tense.
Negative: may not/mayn't, might not/mightn't
Interrogative: see E below
Infinitive: to be + likely

nay/might + present infinitive can express possibility in the present . or future:

He may/might tell his wife. (Perhaps he tells/will tell his wife.)

He may/might emigrate. (Perhaps he will emigrate.)

Ann may/might know Tom's address. (Perhaps Ann knows etc.) Similarly with the continuous infinitive:

He may/might be waiting at the station. (Perhaps he is waiting at

the station.)

He may/might be waiting at the station when we arrive. (Perhaps he will be waiting etc.)

may or might for present or future possibility Normally either can be used. might slightly increases the doubt.

Note that in speech we can also indicate increased doubt by stressing ^nay/might. Tom 'may lend you the money (with a strong stress on may) implies that this is not very likely. Tom might Send you the money (with a strong stress on might) implies 'I don't think this is at all likely/

I think it is unlikely'-

might must be used in the conditional and when the expression is introduced by a verb in the past tense:

If you invited him he might come. I knew we might have to wait at the frontier. He said he might hire a car. (indirect speech)

may/might in the negative and interrogative

The negative presents no problems:

He may/might not believe your story. (Perhaps he won't/doesn't believe your story.)

The interrogative is normally expressed by do you think? or a construction with be + likely:

Do you think he's alone?

Do you think he believes your story? ,:,   Is it likely thai the plane will be late?

Is the plane likely to be late?

may? for possibility very seldom introduces a sentence. It may be placed later on:

When may we expect you? What may be the result of the new tax? But a construction with be + likely or think is more usual:

When are you likely to arrive?

What do you think the result will be?

might? is just possible;

Might they be waiting outside the station?

But *Could they be waiting?* or *Do you think they are waiting?* would be more usual (see 134).

may/might in the affirmative, however, can form part of a question:

Do you think he may/might not be able to pay? (See 104 for this type of question.)

133   may/might + perfect infinitive

A   This is used in speculations about past actions:

He may/might have gone = It is possible that he went/has gone or

Perhaps he went/has gone. might must be used, as shown in 132 D, when the main verb is in a

past tense:

He said/thought that she might have missed the plane. might, not may, must be used when the uncertainty no longer exists:

He cane home alone. You shouldn't have let him do that; he might

have got lost. (But he didn't get lost.)

So in the sentence:

You shouldn't have drunk the wine: it may/might have been drugged

the words it may have been drugged would indicate that we are still uncertain whether it was drugged or not. it might have been drugged could have the same meaning but could also mean that we know it

wasn't drugged. might, not may, is also used when the matter was never put to the test, as in:

Perhaps we should have taken the other road. It might have been

quicker. It's a good thing you didn't lend him the money. You might never

have got it back. Sentences of this kind are very similar to the third type of conditional sentence:

// we had taken the other road we might have arrived earlier.

B   may/might can be used in conditional sentences instead of will/would to indicate a possible instead of a certain result:

If he sees you he will stop. (certain) If he sees you he may stop. (possible)

Similarly:

I/you poured hot water into it, it might crack and If you had left it there someone might have stolen it.

(See 223 B.)

134   **could** as an alternative to may/might

A   **could be** can be used instead of may/might be:

I wonder where Tom is. ~ He may/might/could be in the library. (Perhaps he is in the library.)

Similarly when be is part of the continuous infinitive:

I wonder why Bill isn't here? ~ He may/might/cauld still be waiting for a bus. (Perhaps he is still waiting for a bus.)

And when be is part of a passive infinitive:

Do you think the plane will be on time? ~ I don't know. It may/ might/could be delayed by fog. (Perhaps it will be delayed by fog.)

In the interrogative we can use either **could** or **might**:

Might/Could he be waiting/or us at the station? (Do you think he is waiting . . , ?)

In the negative, though, there is a difference of meaning between **could** and **may/might**:

He may/might not be driving the car himself. (Perhaps he isn't

driving the car himself.)

But He couldn't be driving the car himself espressos a negative '. deduction. It means 'This is impossible- He can't drive'.

could + the perfect infinitive of any verb can be used instead of .: .^Slay/might + perfect infinitive (possibility):

£„ / wonder how Tom knew about Ann's engagement. ~

He may/might/could have heard it from Jack. (Perhaps he heard it from Jack.)

As in A above, in the interrogative we can use might or could:

Could/Might the bank have made a mistake? (Do you think it is I'   possible that the bank (has) made a mistake?)

But in the negative the meanings differ:

> *Ann might not have seen Tom yesterday* (perhaps she didn't see him) but
> *Ann couldn't have seen Tom yesterday,* (negative deduction: perhaps Ann and Tom were in different towns)

135   **can** used to express possibility

General possibility

Subject + **can** can mean 'it is possible', i.e. circumstances permit (this is quite different from the kind of possibility expressed by **may**):

> *You can ski on the hills. (There is enough snow.)*
> *We can't bathe here on account of the sharks. (It isn't safe.)*
> *Can you get to the top of the mountain in one day? (Is it possible?)*

can also express occasional possibility:

> *Measles can be quite dangerous.* (Sometimes it is possible for them to be quite dangerous/Sometimes they are quite dangerous.)
> *The Straits of Dover can be very rough.* (It is possible for the Straits ^^a.i,, to be rough; this sometimes happens.)

could is used in the past:

> He could be very unreasonable. (Sometimes he was unreasonable; this was a possibility.)

can is used in this way in the present or past tense only, and chiefly in the affirmative.