

English auxiliary verbs

1. Auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs serve grammatical functions, for this reason they are said to belong to the functional category of words. The main auxiliary verbs in English are DO, BE and HAVE. Others, which serve to mark ASPECT, MOOD and VOICE include, amongst others CAN, MAY, MIGHT, MUST, OUGHT TO, SHOULD, WILL and WOULD.

Auxiliary verbs are said to belong to a ‘closed’ category of words, because new ones cannot be added to this class. In this respect, they are different from lexical verbs, or ‘contentful’ verbs, which belong to the ‘open class’ of words because new words can be added at any time, e.g. *google, spam, tweet*.

Some characteristics of auxiliary verbs, which differentiate them from lexical verbs, include their ability to invert with the subject in question formation and to combine with the negative particle NOT ($\rightarrow n't$) to negate sentences. The questions formed thus are called ‘yes/no questions’, because they elicit ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as answers.

Table 1: The function of auxiliaries in question formation and negation

ACTIVE	INTERROGATIVE	NEGATIVE
He was smoking	Was he smoking?	He wasn't smoking
She will sing tonight	Will she sing tonight?	She won't sing tonight
Sam has peeled the apples	Has Sam peeled the apples?	Sam hasn't peeled the apples
Sam should go to school	Should Sam go to school?	Sam shouldn't go to school
They can go now	Can they go now?	They can't go now

Lexical verbs cannot be fronted to form questions in English, and they cannot combine with the negative particle NOT, as shown by the ungrammaticality of the following sentences:

- *Smokes he?¹
- *Peeled Sam the apples?
- *She left not yesterday.

1.1. DO support

When there is no auxiliary present, auxiliary DO is inserted to form questions and negate sentences. Auxiliary DO has no intrinsic meaning, it serves a purely grammatical function. It is also referred to ‘do support’, or as ‘dummy do’.

¹ In Linguistics, the use of an asterisk at the start of a sentence serves to indicate that it is ungrammatical.

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Note that in all sentences, it is always the first verb that inflects for tense and agrees with the subject. In the questions and negated sentences in Table 2, the first verb is DO, so it picks up the tense which is marked on the lexical verb in the affirmative sentence, and the lexical verb reverts to its citation form. Auxiliary DO has three forms, *do*, *does* and *did*:

Table 2: Auxiliary DO is used in question formation and negation

AFFIRMATIVE	INTERROGATIVE	NEGATIVE
We/you/they care	Do we/you/they care?	We/you/they don't care
She loves carrots	Does she love carrots?	She doesn't love carrots
You smiled	Did you smile?	You didn't smile
He/she left	Did he/she leave?	He/she didn't leave

Auxiliary DO is also used to emphasize the truth of an assertion:

- He **does** smoke
- We **do** like carrots

1.2. Auxiliary BE

Auxiliary BE, like DO, has no intrinsic meaning, but it serves the important function of marking Tense and Agreement features when there is no lexical verb present i.e. when the predicate is an adjective or a prepositional phrase, e.g.:

- He **is** tall (adjectival predicate)
- They **were** in the garden (prepositional predicate)

In these sentences, the auxiliary serves to mark tense and it agrees with the subject with respect to Number (singular or plural) and person (1st, 2nd, 3rd) as shown in Table 2. Auxiliary BE has far more forms than any of the other auxiliary verbs:

Table 3: The forms of auxiliary BE for the present tense

	Person	Present Tense
singular	1 st	I am happy
	2 nd	You are happy
	3 rd	He/she/it is happy
plural	1 st , 2 nd & 3 rd	We/you/they are happy

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In the case of the past tense, *was* is the form for the 1st and 3rd person singular subjects and *were* is used for 2nd person singular and all plural subjects:

Table 4: The forms of auxiliary BE for the past tense

	Person	Past Tense
singular	1 st & 3 rd	I/he/she/it was happy
	2 nd	You were happy
plural	1 st , 2 nd & 3 rd	We/you/they were happy

2. Voice

The main VOICE distinctions relate to ACTIVE and PASSIVE sentences - these terms express the relationship between the subject and object of a verb. In the case of the ACTIVE VOICE, the doer of the action is the subject, and in the case of the PASSIVE VOICE the object of the verb becomes the subject of the sentence, and the subject of the active sentence then appears in a prepositional phrase introduced by the preposition *by*, which follows the verb.

2.1. Passive BE

Passive BE is used to form passive sentences in English. It is inserted before the main verb, which then appears in the past participle form ending in *-ed* or *-en* (except for irregular verbs). Note that since the auxiliary is the first verb in the passive sentence, it inflects for Tense and agreement:

Table 5: From Active to Passive voice

ACTIVE VOICE		PASSIVE VOICE
The possum bit the cat	→	The cat was bitten by the possum
Sam ate the bananas	→	The bananas were eaten by Sam
Pippa kicked the ball	→	The ball was kicked by Pippa
Pippa fetched the balls	→	The balls were fetched by Pippa
Charles sang the lullaby	→	The lullaby was sung by Charles
Fred held the puppies	→	The puppies were held by Fred

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3. Aspect

The term ASPECT is used to distinguish the status of events and processes, i.e. whether they are ongoing (progressing), or completed. Note that ASPECT is not to be confused with TENSE, which serves to mark the time at which the event or state denoted by the verb takes/took place with respect to the time of utterance.

3.1. Progressive BE

Progressive BE as the term suggests is used to indicate that the action is in progress, or ongoing. This can be in the present, the past or the future. Progressive BE is always followed by the gerund participle form of the verb (the *-ing* form). Note that since the auxiliary is the first verb, it inflects for tense and agreement:

- *I **am**/was singing*
- *He/she **is**/was running*
- *We/you/they **are**/were walking*

3.2. Perfective HAVE

The term perfect (from Latin *perfectus* meaning performed, completed) is used to indicate that the action/event was completed prior to some point of reference - in the present, the past or the future. The verb that follows perfective HAVE is always in the past participle form - ending in *-ed* or *-en* (except for irregular verbs). Auxiliary HAVE has three forms, *has*, *have* and *had*:

Action completed prior to some point of reference in the present:

- I/we **have** arrived
- He/she **has** eaten the bananas
- I/we **have** swept the dust under the carpet
- You **have** sung the blues

Action completed prior to some point of reference in the past:

- I/we **had** arrived
- He/she **had** eaten the bananas
- I/we **had** swept the dust under the carpet
- You **had** sung the blues

Action completed prior to some point of reference in the future:

- I/we will **have** arrived
- He/she will **have** eaten the bananas
- I/we will **have** swept the dust under the carpet
- You will **have** sung the blues

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Note that when another auxiliary is present (WILL in the above examples), the verb HAVE has the same form regardless of the subject or the tense of the sentence. It is always the first verb, and only the first verb that is marked for Tense. However, whilst HAVE has three forms *had*, *had* and *have*, WILL is invariable - i.e. it has the same form for all Tenses and for all subjects.

4. Modals

Modals are so called because they express the MOOD, i.e. the opinion or attitude of the speaker towards what is being said. Modal verbs include *can*, *could*, *may*, *must*, *might*, *ought to*, *should*, *will*, *would*. The various opinions or attitudes of the speaker that they express are shown in Table 6:

Table 6: Modals express ability, obligation, permission, possibility, etc.

MODAL	EXAMPLE	MEANING EXPRESSED
CAN	You can jump	Ability - you are physically capable jumping Permission - you have permission to jump
MAY	He may jump	Possibility - It is possible that he will jump Permission - He has permission to jump
MIGHT	He might jump	Possibility - It is possible that he will jump
MUST	He must jump He must be hungry	Obligation - he has to jump Opinion that the person must be hungry (given the circumstances)
OUGHT TO	He ought to jump	Belief that it is necessary for the person to jump
SHOULD	He should jump	Opinion that it is in the interest of the person to jump
WILL	He will jump	Belief that the person will jump at some time in the future
WOULD	He would jump	Belief that given certain conditions, the person will jump (conditional)

CAN has a past tense form COULD. But there is only one present tense form - it does not take an s ending for the 3rd person singular subject, e.g.: **He cans sing* is ungrammatical. Similarly with the modals MAY, MIGHT, MUST, OUGHT TO, SHOULD, WILL and WOULD which do not inflect for Tense or agreement - i.e. they have only one form.

Note that the use of SHALL with 1st person subjects is becoming archaic in some varieties of English, and is generally replaced by WILL. Thus it is grammatical to say *I/we will sing*, instead of *I/we shall sing*.

Although it is generally claimed that WOULD is the past tense of WILL, the meanings of these auxiliaries have undergone some semantic change. Though both can be used for the conditional, WILL is more definite, and WOULD is more tentative.

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5. The order of auxiliary and lexical verbs

In any sentence, there can only be one lexical verb, but there can be several auxiliary verbs:

- One verb - We watched
- Two verbs - We have watched
- Three verbs - We would have watched
- Four verbs - We would have been watched
- Five verbs - We would have been being watched (by the police)

Note that:

- The last verb is always the lexical verb, and all preceding verbs are auxiliary verbs.
- Tense is always marked on the first verb - even in the case of the auxiliaries that have only one form.
- All the other verbs are in non-tensed forms. Note that the gerund participle (*-ing*) form, or the past participle forms (ending in *-ed* or *-en*) are not tensed forms.
- Only one auxiliary of each type is permitted.
- Verb types occur in strict order as follows:
 - Only lexical verb - *She likes carrots*
 - DO + lexical verb e.g. *She does like carrots* - where auxiliary DO serves as emphasis. If DO is present, no other auxiliary can occur in the sentence.
 - The only possible order is as follows: Modal auxiliary + Perfective HAVE + Progressive BE + Passive BE + lexical verb as in *He would have been being watched*. The order of these auxiliaries is fixed.

Note that only the first verb is tensed. The form of the verb (auxiliary or lexical) depends on the preceding auxiliary:

- The gerund participle (*-ing* form) occurs after progressive BE
- The past participle forms (ending in *-ed* or *-en* for regular verbs) occur after passive BE and perfective HAVE.

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Table 7: Order and combination of auxiliary verbs in English

	MODAL	PERFECTIVE HAVE	PROGRESSIVE BE	PASSIVE BE	LEXICAL VERB
She					watches/watched
She	can/could/may/must/ought to/ will/should/would				watch
She				is/was	watched
She			is/was		watching
She			is/was	being	watched
She		has/had			watched
She		has/had	been		watched
She		has/had	been	being	watched
She	could/may/might/must/ought to/ will/should/would	have			watched
She	could/may/must/ought to/ will/should/would	have		been	watched
She	can/could/may/must/ought to/ will/should/would			be	watched
She	could/may/must/ought to/ will/should/would		be	being	watched
She	could/may/must/ought to/ will/should/would	have	been	being	watched