MODAL VERB “MAY”

May is used exactly the same way as “might” is used when talking about a possibility. They may pass the test, they studied for it for a long time. He may be at home, he said he wasn’t going anywhere. They may travel to Africa next year.

As with “might”, “may” is used in the above examples to indicate a possibility of each of the situations.

The negative form of “may” is also used exactly the same way that “might not” is used. It emphasizes more doubt for the situation. They may not pass the test, they didn’t study that hard for it. He may not be at home, he said he might have to go to a meeting.

They may not travel to Africa next year, they might not get enough time off from work.

The formula when using “might” or “may” as a possibility is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>+ MIGHT/MAY</th>
<th>+ VERB IN INFINITIVE FORM</th>
<th>+ COMPLEMENTSIZER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>might</td>
<td>go</td>
<td>to the store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>might</td>
<td>see</td>
<td>your friend soon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>may</td>
<td>call</td>
<td>her later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>may</td>
<td>be</td>
<td>in Detroit now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td>might</td>
<td>get</td>
<td>dark soon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>might</td>
<td>eat</td>
<td>at Sam’s, we are not sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>may</td>
<td>come</td>
<td>to the picnic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“MAY” is also used when asking for formal permission. The request is usually for a person in authority such as an official, boss, or older relative. It’s commonly used in very polite requests.

Examples:

Request: Mother, may I go to the movies with Gabriela after dinner?
Answer: Yes you may.

Request: Sir, may I see you for a couple of minutes?
Answer: Certainly, what can I do for you?

Request: Officer, may we ask you a couple of questions?
Answer: Sure, what do you need to know?

Request: May I ask you a question, are you married or single?
Answer: No, it’s none of your business.

Note: we also use May when we request permission to do something.

May we come in?
Mommy, may I go to the bathroom?
Sir, may we leave the office a little early?
May I be excused from the meeting for a few minutes?
Get Smart! Quiz A

Read the following sentences carefully and determine if the modal verb “May” is being used to request for permission politely or show a remote possibility of something happening.

1. Professor Smith, May I talk to you after class?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

2. We may go to Europe next summer.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

3. Sir. May I see your driver’s license?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

4. The economy may recover next year.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

5. May I talk to you outside?
   A. Possibility  A. Permission

6. Take your umbrella with you. It may rain later.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

7. Mom!! May I go out with my friends?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

8. May I take your order sir?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

9. I am sorry I am late. May I come in?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

10. If you don’t change your lateness habits, you may not have your job next year.
    A. Possibility  B. Permission

11. May I have your passport?
    A. Possibility  B. Permission

12. I may not be able to finish the job today.
    A. Possibility  B. Permission

13. You may kiss the bride now.
    A. Possibility  B. Permission
14. Richard may be sick. He wasn’t feeling well yesterday.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

15. May I ask you a personal question?
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

16. The boss said that if the company does well this year, we may get a substantial rate.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

17. You may be right or you may be wrong. Well find out soon.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

18. My nephew is coming to visit us in New York this summer, and he said that he may stay with us while he is here.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

19. May I use your laptop? I didn’t bring mine.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission

20. You may take those books with you if you like them.
   A. Possibility  B. Permission