

Working With Modals: “Dear Abby” Letters

“Dear Abby,” was a famous and popular advice column for many years in American newspapers. People would write about their problems and the advice columnist, who used the name Abby, would respond with advice. This inspired many more similar advice columns worldwide.

When giving advice, people tend to make a *lot* of use of modals, because one doesn’t want to seem as if one is *telling* other people what to do: if you give someone advice using the grammatical imperative mood (“Do your homework!”) it seems rude and disrespectful, and people tend not to respond well to advice like this. The imperative *is* sometimes used in advice columns, but one often sees modals used instead.

The modals we’re studying in our course are the following four:

Modal	Most Common Purpose/Nuance
should	suggesting a wise or good action; describing what the writer thinks is a good idea
must	expressing necessity or obligation
might	expressing possibility; or expressing a more speculative
can	expressing ability; saying that someone is <i>able</i> to do something

These modals get a lot of use in advice columns.

Assignment:

Let’s start with an example.

Here is an example Advice Request Letter:

Dear Helping Heart,

I think my husband is in love with someone else. He often comes home late at night, and I recently found some charges on his credit card bill from a local flower shop. We have been married for twenty years now, and our life is not as exciting or romantic as it used to be, but I thought our marriage was doing okay.

I am shocked and heartbroken, as well as angry. I can’t believe he is cheating on me. **Do you think I should hire a private detective to follow him and find out the truth?** I am worried that if I ask him directly, he might just lie to me. The idea of having to listen to lies makes me feel sick, and I think it would ruin our marriage. I gave him the best years of my life, raised our children with him... and now I don’t know what to do.

Sincerely,
Desperately Confused

Next, here is a **response letter** offering advice.

Dear Desperately Confused,

My goodness, I imagine you are in a lot of pain and feel very confused right now. That is natural. Your husband's behavior is unusual, and it's quite understandable that you are worried. I also understand why you are scared to ask him directly about these things.

However, I think you **should** talk to your husband. After all, if you have known him for twenty years, you also know his personality, and you know whether you **can** trust his response, right?

You **might want to** think about making preparations for what will happen if your husband confesses to an affair. **Can** you forgive him? **Would** you want to stay together? **Can** you support yourself financially if you decide to separate? You **must** at least think about these things, even if they feel unthinkable, just in case the worst case scenario happens.

Try to remember that you **might** be wrong. People **can** sometimes misinterpret things. Your husband **might** have bought flowers for someone who is ill and in the hospital. He **might** really just be working late. You **must not** jump to conclusions without talking to him: it's not fair and you **might** end up harming the trust that you have developed during your long time together.

If talking about this feels impossible, you **need to** remind yourself that you **can** do it. You **can**, and you **must**.

Good luck,
Helping Heart

In our writing exercise for **Day 2**, you will read some advice request letters, choose one, and work as a group to write advice for one of them.

Step 1: First, during our **Day 1** class, look in the **Advice Request Forum**. There are several different letters requesting advice. Read the letters and then discuss them with your partner. Try to choose one of the letters for today's in-class activity. Talk about what advice you think makes sense for each problem, and discuss any disagreements you have with your partner.

Step 2: After the end of our **Day 1** class, think about the letters you saw, and what advice you think would be good for each situation.

Step 3: Before you write anything, complete the Textbook and Non-Textbook Related Videos for this week, which discuss the skills and strategies you need to write a good response letter. For example, you will analyze the response letter above. **Extract some Template Sentences** and **look at how modals are used in the letter**.

Step 4: Now, edit and proofread your **Response Letter**. Check it for formatting, comparing it to the **Response Letter Example** at the top of this page. Think about how to make it **empathetic, supportive, thoughtful, and interesting**.

Step 5: Post your response letter as a reply to the **Advice Request Letter** it answers in the **Advice Request** forum. Don't worry if someone else has already offered advice.

That's it!