

Here is Audio Word Study #116 from Jane Lawson at DailyStep.com

How to use MAY, and the difference between MAY, MIGHT and COULD

As it is a modal, MAY is always followed by the 'bare infinitive' of the verb. This means the infinitive without 'to'. So we say 'may be', not 'may ~~to~~-be'. We say 'may have been', not 'may ~~to~~ have been'.

Meaning 1: We use MAY to express possibility

Note: Other modals that express possibility are MIGHT and COULD. MIGHT sounds less possible than MAY or COULD.

Examples: 1. I may be a little late tomorrow, as there is a train strike.

2. The problem may have been caused by an electrical fault. (*note: this means 'it is possible that the problem was caused by an electrical fault'.*)

3. I may be having a party on Saturday. Would you like to come? (*note: If I say 'I might be having a party', it sounds less likely that I will have the party.*)

Meaning 2: MAY is used when making a request or asking permission.

Examples: 1. Students may leave the school at lunch time only when accompanied by a teacher. (*note: this sounds very formal and old-fashioned.*)

2. May I open the window, please? It's hot in here.

3. How may I help you? (*note: this sounds very formal.*)

4. May I introduce David Harper? He is our Managing Director. (*again, this is formal.*)

Meaning 3: MAY is used to introduce a wish or a hope

Note: We often use this form when making a toast. In other words, when we all raise our glasses of wine (or something) to a person or an idea, and then touch our glasses together.

Examples: 1. May you live a long a healthy life! (*note: this means 'I hope that you live a long and healthy life!'*)

2. May all your dreams come true!

3. Happy Birthday Sarah! And may you have a wonderful year to come!

Meaning 4: MAY is used to introduce a statement that is very different from the statement you really want to make, so that the two statements can be compared and contrasted.

Examples: 1. England may have some great players, but in this World Cup they played pretty badly. (*note: this means 'Even though England have** some great players, in this World Cup they played pretty badly.'*)

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2. The Ancient Romans may have been a very cruel nation in many ways, but they still left a legacy of civilisation in the lands they conquered. (**note:** *this means 'Although the Ancient Romans were a very cruel nation in many ways, they still left a legacy of civilisation in the lands they conquered.'*)

Now, write your own sentences using MAY. Try to make them true to your own life if possible as this will help you to remember them better.

**** Technically, the correct grammar here is 'Even though England **has** some great players...' but because I am referring to the England football team, which consists of many people, I use the plural form of the verb (i.e. England have some great players) rather than the singular form of the verb (i.e. England has some great players.). This is common in spoken English.**

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