We use the modal verbs *might*, *may* and *could* + an infinitive form without *to* when we think it is possible that something is true. We use *must* when we are sure it is true and *can’t* when we are sure it isn’t true.

**Nur:** So, we can use *might*, *may* and *could* for making guesses?

**Sophie:** Yes. They’re all used when we are not sure about something, but we think that it is possible that it is true.

_They might be some kind of small pig._

**Nur:** But could I also say, ‘They could be a kind of pig’ or ‘They may be a kind of pig’?

**Sophie:** Yes, you could. The meanings are really similar. You can choose whether to use *may*, *might* or *could*.

**Nur:** Ah, OK. So if I’m *not sure* about something I can use *may*, *might* or *could* and the meaning is almost the same. That’s easy to remember.

**Sophie:** Yes, that’s right. But there’s something else which affects the meaning, and that’s *how* you say it; the ‘intonation’. If you stress *may*, *might* or *could* it sounds less probable.

_It could be mango juice._ (less likely)
_It could be mango juice._ (more likely)

**Nur:** OK, and if I’m *sure* about something, what modals do I use?

**Sophie:** We use *must* if we think something is true and *can’t* if we think something isn’t true.

*So, it must come from an animal.*
_That looks like tomato juice, but it can’t be, that would be too easy._

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You’re right. Once you know the rules, they’re pretty easy. Don’t forget they are always followed by the infinitive form without to. We also use *may/might + be + -ing* for something happening right now or a possible future arrangement.

*That might be Mum phoning from Bali.*

*She might be going to Australia.*

You also used *‘it could be a kind of pig’* for describing something in the present.

Yes, but that was with the verb *to be*, a stative verb. We use the *-ing* form with active or dynamic verbs.

I see. Is there anything else to be careful about?

Yes, if you are talking about possibility in the past you need the modal + *have + past participle*.

*She might have taken those photos in China.*

*I may have thrown it away by mistake.*

Hmm. I think I *may* need to practise these verbs a bit.

Yes, you *might* be right!

Watch the video on our website!