

Modals of certainty, possibility, speculation, deduction... or whatever you want to call them

Let's consider this situation:

John finishes work at 5.00pm. He lives 30 minutes away from his work. He usually gets home at 5.30pm sharp.

Example	Modal	Percentage of certainty something is true
It's 6pm. John must be home by now.	MUST	95-100 %
It's 5.28pm. John could be home.	COULD	80-94.99 %
It's 5.25pm. John might/may be home.	MIGHT/MAY*	75-79.99 %
Example	Modal	Percentage of certainty something is NOT true
It's 5.23pm. John mighn't/may not be home.	MIGHTN'T / MAY NOT	75-79.99 %
(?) It's 5.20pm. John couldn't be home yet.	COULDN'T	80-94.99 %
It's 5.15pm. John can't be home yet.	CAN'T	95-100%

Important things to consider:

1. The opposite (not 'negative') form of 'must' in this sense is **CAN'T**. 'must not' refers to prohibition only.
2. Even though you can use 'couldn't' to refer to certainty in the present (even though 'could' is the past form of 'can' for other uses, such as ability), it might be very confusing, so you might as well go without it. That's why it appears in grey.
3. The negative form always appear right after the modal verb.
4. Can you really measure the difference of certainty between 75% or 80%? Don't you think these are random figures? Certainly, they are!
 - a. Depending on which grammatical source you check, you will find that modals change not only percentage of certainty, but also the order in which they appear to express certainty!
 - b. The speaker also shows degree of certainty or uncertainty through intonation and stress. If the speaker stresses the modal verb, they are expressing more uncertainty than if they stress the main verb.
 - c. What is for sure is that 'may' is more formal than 'might'. Therefore, you will use 'may' in formal contexts and 'might' in more informal ones (generally speaking). That's why you will have seen the contracted negative form of 'might' (mighn't) but most likely not the contracted form of 'may' (? mayn't).

PRESENT CONTINUOUS FORM (to express degree certainty of an ongoing event):

modal (not) + be + V-ing

It's 5.15pm. John **might be arriving** home (now).

modal + be + V-ing

PERFECT FORM (to express degree of certainty of a past event)

modal (not) + have + past participle

It's 6pm. John **must have arrived** home.

modal + have + past participle

Remember: the negative form is **NOT** *John might haven't arrived yet.

BUT John mightn't have arrived yet.

PERFECT CONTINUOUS FORM (to express degree of certainty of a past event that might have taken a while)

modal (not) + have + been + V-ing

It was 5.15 pm. John **must have been driving** home at that time.

modal + have + been + V-ing