

---

# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute Grammar

### May, might, could



*NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript*

---

**Sophie**

Hello again. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Sophie.

**Neil**

And with me, Neil. Hello.

**Sophie**

Today's programme is all about the words **may**, **might** and **could**.

**Neil**

Yes, we'll look at how to use these three little words to talk about present and future possibilities...

**Sophie**

We'll tell you what to watch out for...

**Neil**

We'll give you a top tip to make your spoken English sound really natural...

**Sophie**

... and we'll finish with a quiz.

**Neil**

So listen carefully! Now the first thing to say about **may**, **might** and **could** is that they are often followed by an infinitive verb without **to**. And here's Catherine... Hello!

**Catherine**

Hello!

**Neil**

...to bring us our first example. Catherine, what are you having for dinner tonight?

**Catherine**

Well, I **may make** chicken curry.

**Neil**

Sounds good.

**Catherine**

...Or I **might have** steak...

**Neil**

Even better.

**Catherine**

...Or I **could get** a takeaway.

**Neil**

Not very healthy - but very convenient.

**Sophie**

So, tonight Catherine **may have** chicken; she **might have** steak: she **could get** a takeaway. **May, might** and **could** with an infinitive show all three options are future possibilities.

**Neil**

Good. Now those examples were about future possibilities – Catherine’s dinner tonight – but we can also use **may, might** and **could** with an infinitive to talk about present possibilities, like this:

**Catherine**

I think Jackie likes chicken - but she **might prefer** fish.

I don’t know where Shaheen is. He **could be** at work.

The agency **may have** the information you want.

**Sophie**

Right, so that's present and future possibilities. Now, we can also... (*someone knocks at the door*) ...er, hello?

**Woman**

Oops, sorry – wrong studio!

**Neil**

Who was that?

**Sophie**

I’m not sure. She **may be** from IT.

**Neil**

Or, she **might be** the new presenter.

**Sophie**

She **could be** the studio manager.

**Neil**

We're all guessing ...

**Sophie**

Yes, well, anyway, as I was about to say, we often use **may**, **might** and **could** to make guesses.

**IDENT**

You're listening to 6 Minute English.

**Sophie**

And we're talking about **may**, **might** and **could**. Now, for negatives, we use **might not** or **may not**. So we can say:

**Catherine**

I **might not cook** chicken curry.

I think that woman is the new studio manager – but she **may not be**.

**Sophie**

The short form of **might not** is **mightn't**, but this is not so usual.

**Neil**

...and some people shorten **may not** to **mayn't**, but that's unusual too.

**Sophie**

Now, we promised you a word of warning...

**Neil**

We did.

**Sophie**

... and here it is. The negative of **could** is **couldn't**, but be very careful with **couldn't** when you're talking about future possibility or future uncertainty. Neil, give us an example situation.

**Neil**

Yes. Imagine you're in an airport. Your plane is due to take off in an hour from now, but the weather is getting worse – you're getting worried. You might say this:

**Catherine**

If the weather gets worse, our plane **could take off** late. We **might not take off** at all!

**Neil**

Now that's all fine, but if you say: We **couldn't take off** – you're talking about an impossible situation in the past, not an uncertain situation in the future. So you can't use **couldn't** in our airport example.

**Sophie**

So watch out for **couldn't**.

**Neil**

Yes. Stick with **might not** or **may not** if you want to play it safe here.

**Sophie**

Now, for questions, you can use **might**, **may** and **could**, but a top tip to make your English sound more natural is to use the phrase **Do you think...?**

**Neil**

So you can say **Might Catherine have chicken curry for dinner?** But it sounds more natural to say **Do you think Catherine might have chicken curry for dinner?**

**Sophie**

So it's **Do you think**, then a **subject**, then **might**, **may** or **could** plus **infinitive**.

**Neil**

Sophie, I think we could be ready for our quiz. Number one. Which is the correct answer to the question: Where are you going on holiday? Is it a) I may go to Spain or b) I might go to Spain.

**Sophie**

It's b) I **may go** to Spain.

**Neil**

That's right. Number two. Which is correct? The traffic is getting worse, so a) I may not be home on time or b) I could not be home on time.

**Sophie**

It's a) The traffic is getting worse, so I **may not be** home on time.

**Neil**

And the last one. Which sounds more natural? a) **Might we have to go now** or b) **Do you think we might have to go now?**

**Sophie**

It's b) Do you think we might have to go now?

**Neil**

Well done if you got those right and yes, we do have to go now. There's more about this on our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

**Both**

Bye.