

May and might

A **May** and **might** often have a similar meaning when we talk about possibility. Reminder → C15 – C19
However, we prefer **may** in academic or formal language to talk about characteristics or behaviour:

- The seeds from the plant **may** grow up to 20 centimetres in length.
- and in speech we prefer **might** to say what we will possibly do in the future:
- I **might** paint the kitchen purple.

B We don't use **may** to ask questions about the possibility of something happening. Instead we use, for example, **could(n't)** or the phrase **be likely**:

- Could** it be that you don't want to leave? (*not* May it be that you ...?)
- Are you likely** to be in Spain again this summer? (*not* May you be in Spain ...?)

It is possible to use **might** in this type of question, but it is rather formal:

- Might** they be persuaded to change their minds?

Note that we can use **may** in formally asking for permission and offering help:

- May** I leave now?
- May** I help you?

C **Might** (not 'may') + **bare infinitive** is sometimes used to talk about what was *typically* the case in the past. This is a formal or literary use:

- During the war, the police **might** *arrest* you for criticising the government.
- Years ago children **might** *be sent* down mines at the age of six. (passive form)

We can also use **could** + **bare infinitive** in examples like this to talk about past ability (see Unit 15). For example, 'During the war, the police could arrest you ...' means that the police were legally able to arrest you.

D When we say that a person or thing compensates to some extent for a limitation or weakness by having another characteristic, we can use a pattern with **may / might not + bare infinitive ... but ...** or **may / might not have + past participle ... but ...**:

- The painting **may not** *be* a masterpiece, **but** the colours are remarkable.
- She **might not** *have danced* very gracefully, **but** she had a lot of energy and enthusiasm.

E We use **may / might** (not 'can') + **have + past participle** and **may / might** (not 'can') + **be + -ing** to talk about possible events in the past, present and future:

- Do you think Laura **may / might** *have completed* the report by now? (past)
- His maths **may / might** *have improved* by the time the exam comes round. (future)
- Marco isn't in his office. He **may / might** *be working* at home today. (present)
- When I go to Vienna I **may / might** *be staying* with Max, but I'm not sure yet. (future)

Note that **could** can be used in these sentences instead of **may** or **might**:

- Do you think Laura **could** *have completed* the report by now?

We can use **may / might have been + -ing** to talk about possible situations or activities that went on over a period of past time:

- Callum didn't know where the ball was, but he thought his sister **might have been playing** with it before she left for school.

Exercises

17.1 Complete the sentences with either **may** or **might**, whichever is more likely. If neither is possible, use an alternative. **A & B**

- 1 We go to Majorca for our holiday this summer.
- 2 The planet Venus be seen clearly in the night sky this month.
- 3 you see Yasemin this weekend?
- 4 I feel really sore after playing tennis. I think I have a bath.
- 5 A: Someone's left their coat. B: it be Nadia's?
- 6 Exceeding the stated dose cause drowsiness.

17.2 Underline the correct answer. **C & E**

- 1 You should have come dancing. You *might have enjoyed* / *might enjoy* it.
- 2 She *might have tried* / *might have been trying* to get a book off the top shelf when she fell.
- 3 Dr Carter *might have come* / *might be coming* over this evening, so can you tidy the house up a bit?
- 4 As recently as the 1950s, employers *might be requiring* / *might require* a woman to leave her job when she got married.
- 5 I've been offered a new job, so I *may be moving* / *may have moved* to Dubai.
- 6 Why not come and see us in March? The weather *may have been improving* / *may have improved* by then.
- 7 During the riots of the 1960s, people *might be imprisoned* / *may be imprisoned* simply for being on the streets.
- 8 He said he was in a lot of pain, but he *may have been exaggerating* / *may exaggerate*.
- 9 In the past, left-handed children *might be punishing* / *might be punished* for not holding a pen in their right hand.
- 10 I *may have told* / *may tell* you this before. I can't remember.

17.3 Complete these sentences in any appropriate way. **D**

- 1 He may not be the best singer in the world, but
- 2 Hugh's old car might not be terribly comfortable, but
- 3 Her English grammar may not be very accurate, but

Now expand these notes to complete the sentences below.

sound / exciting agree / him express / feelings openly ~~work~~ / quickly

- 4 He may / might not work very quickly but at least he's very reliable.
- 5, but his opinions on music make you think.
- 6, but she is really very fond of you.
- 7, but the new museum of fishing is actually very good.

