



## Avoiding Ambiguity – Could I, Should I, May I –

Welcome back to Digimar videos!

The purpose of this video is to examine VTS communication issues arising from the use of modal verbs that may lead to misunderstandings. In this video we will talk about the use of ambiguous modal verbs such as *may*, *might*, *should*, *can*, and *could* in maritime VHF communication. We will also recommend alternative expressions for asking for permission, giving permission, giving advice, and issuing warnings.

Ambiguity refers to a situation where something has more than one possible meaning and interpretation, thus leading to confusion and possibly misunderstanding. After watching this video, you will be able to identify ambiguous meanings of modal verbs and use appropriate alternative expressions to eliminate the ambiguous aspect of some modal verbs.

This video uses examples from real-life scenarios. They may have been kept in their authentic form to support learning, even when they include mistakes or deviate from maritime communication standards.

### Modal verbs

In VTS communication the modal verbs CAN, CANNOT, COULD, MAY, and SHOULD are mostly used but should be avoided.

### CAN, COULD and CANNOT

The modal verb *can/could* describes either the possibility or the ability of doing something. In maritime communication, *can/could* should only be used to express ability.

Can you proceed?

- Yes, I can proceed.
- No, I cannot proceed.

When issuing warnings:

- Do not say: You could be running into danger.
- Say: WARNING: You are running into danger.

Let us have a look at a real example in which *can/cannot* are used to express whether someone is able to do something. Digimar VTS asks Motor Vessel Sunrise if she is able to see an object on her starboard beam.

VESSEL	VTS
	Good evening, Captain. Please, <b>can</b> you <b>tell</b> me abeam of you on your starboard side at distance two point three miles there is some



object. **Can** you **tell** me with the lights what type of object is this? Over.

Yes, I will check that now.

Motor Vessel Sunrise responds that she cannot see anything on her starboard beam.

VESSEL	VTS
This is Motor Vessel Sunrise.	
	Motor Vessel. This is VTS.
Yes, it's not visible with the light, we <b>cannot see</b> anything.	
	OK, so she don't have any light? Over.
No, no, I <b>cannot see</b> any light.	
	Sunrise, thank you for your information. Good watch, out.

However, to avoid ambiguity when expressing possibility or ability of doing something, say

“QUESTION: Are you able to see with the lights what type of object is on your starboard side at distance two decimal three miles?”

The modal verb *can* also be used to request and give permission. Let us have a look at another example.

VESSEL	VTS
Good morning. We are temporary stopped just waiting permission to enter Port Greyhaven limit. So we need about six hours to drift. After that we will get back to underway to proceed Port Greyhaven. Over.	
	OK, copy that, Motor Vessel Sunrise. I'm sorry, but you cannot wait inside Sandybay territorial waters. Please proceed about ten miles westerly in the safe zone or safe area and you can drift then on the Oakhaven side. Over.



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In an ambiguous context, however, the message marker QUESTION should be used instead of *can* if one is asking for permission:

“QUESTION: Do we have permission to drift?”

“ANSWER: You do not have permission to wait inside territorial waters. You have permission to drift in the safe zone ten miles westerly.”

### **MAY/MIGHT**

Another modal verb that should not be used for giving permission is *may/might*.

Do not say: "You may enter the fairway."

Say: "You have permission to enter the fairway."

### **SHOULD**

*Should* is used to make recommendations or give advice. However, due to its ambiguous nature:

Do not say: You should anchor in anchorage Bravo 3.

Say: ADVICE. Anchor in anchorage Bravo 3.

Note the authentic example: “When you come inside, you will see the red lighthouse on the top of the pier. So that's the pier that you **should come on.**”

Instead use the following alternative: “ADVICE. Berth at the pier with the red lighthouse on top.”

Please take a moment to reflect on the key takeaway.

*You have permission to ...* is recommended to be used instead of *can, could, should or may* for giving permission.

These practices help ensure safe and effective communication

In the VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology published by the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities you will find more suggestions on how to avoid ambiguity on pages 16–17.

You have successfully reached the end of the video focusing on the use of modal verbs. We hope that it has been useful and that it will help you in completing the chatbot exercises available at: <https://digimar.si/category/digital-tools/chatbots/>.

Thank you for watching.