

**2-13 EXPRESSING DEGREES OF CERTAINTY:  
PRESENT TIME**

<p>-- <i>Why isn't John in class?</i></p> <p><b>100% sure:</b> He <i>is</i> sick.</p> <p><b>95% sure:</b> He <i>must be</i> sick.</p> <p><b>less than 50% sure:</b> { He <i>may be</i> sick. He <i>might be</i> sick. He <i>could be</i> sick.</p>	<p>"Degree of certainty" refers to how sure we are—what we think the chances are—that something is true.</p> <p>If we are sure something is true in the present, we don't need to use a modal. For example, if I say, "John is sick," I am sure; I am stating a fact that I am sure is true. My degree of certainty is 100%.</p>
<p>-- <i>Why isn't John in class?</i></p> <p>(a) He <i>must be</i> sick. (Usually he is in class every day, but when I saw him last night, he wasn't feeling good. So my best guess is that he is sick today. I can't think of another possibility.)</p>	<p><b>Must</b> is used to express a strong degree of certainty about a present situation, but the degree of certainty is still less than 100%.</p> <p>In (a): The speaker is saying: "Probably John is sick. I have evidence to make me believe that he is sick. That is my logical conclusion, but I do not know for certain."</p>
<p>-- <i>Why isn't John in class?</i></p> <p>(b) He <i>may be</i> sick.</p> <p>(c) He <i>might be</i> sick.</p> <p>(d) He <i>could be</i> sick. (I don't really know. He may be at home watching TV. He might be at the library. He could be out of town.)</p>	<p><b>May, might, and could</b> are used to express a weak degree of certainty.</p> <p>In (b), (c), and (d): The speaker is saying: "Perhaps, maybe,* possibly John is sick. I am only making a guess. I can think of other possibilities."</p> <p>(b), (c), and (d) have the same meaning.</p>

\**Maybe* (spelled as one word) is an adverb: *Maybe he is sick.* *May be* (spelled as two words) is a verb form: *He may be sick.*

**2-14 DEGREES OF CERTAINTY:  
PRESENT TIME NEGATIVE**

<p><b>100% sure:</b> Sam <i>isn't</i> hungry.</p> <p><b>99% sure:</b> { Sam <i>couldn't be</i> hungry. Sam <i>can't be</i> hungry.</p> <p><b>95% sure:</b> Sam <i>must not be</i> hungry.</p> <p><b>less than 50% sure:</b> { Sam <i>may not be</i> hungry. Sam <i>might not be</i> hungry.</p>	
<p>(a) Sam doesn't want anything to eat. He <i>isn't</i> hungry. He told me his stomach is full. He says he <i>isn't</i> hungry. I believe him.</p>	<p>In (a): The speaker is sure that Sam is not hungry.</p>
<p>(b) Sam <i>couldn't/can't be</i> hungry! That's impossible! I just saw him eat a huge meal. He has already eaten enough to fill two grown men. Did he really say he'd like something to eat? I don't believe it.</p>	<p>In (b): The speaker believes that there is no possibility that Sam is hungry (but the speaker is not 100% sure). Notice the negative use: <b>couldn't</b> and <b>can't</b> forcefully express the idea that the speaker believes something is impossible.</p>
<p>(c) Sam <i>isn't</i> eating his food. He <i>must not be</i> hungry. That's the only reason I can think of.</p>	<p>In (c): The speaker is expressing a logical conclusion, a "best guess."</p>
<p>(d) I don't know why Sam <i>isn't</i> eating his food. He <i>may/might not be</i> hungry right now. Or maybe he doesn't feel well. Or perhaps he ate just before he got here. Who knows?</p>	<p>In (d): The speaker uses <b>may not/might not</b> to mention a possibility.</p>