Auxiliary Verbs in Verb Phrases

Section 1: Grammar

Read these advertising slogans:

**Have You Brushed Your Teeth Today?**

**Do you want to be really special?**

The verb phrases in the slogans are **Have... brushed, are building and Do... want**. These verb phrases consist of an auxiliary verb plus the main verb:

- **have** (auxiliary verb) plus **brushed** (main verb)
- **are** (auxiliary verb) plus **building** (main verb)
- **do** (auxiliary verb) plus **want** (main verb)

**Be, have and do**

The verbs to be, to have and to do are verbs in their own right, but they are very often used to indicate tenses in other verbs, the difference between singular and plural, and questions – when they are ‘added’ to the main verb in the verb phrase.

**We are enjoying a great holiday.**

In this sentence, the first person plural of the present tense of the verb to be (are) is joined to the present participle of the main verb (enjoying) to form the verb phrase of the sentence: are enjoying.

**Have you lost your mind?**

In this sentence, the second person singular of the present tense of the verb to have (have) is an auxiliary verb in the verb phrase: Have... lost.

**Do you have the right to ask me that?**

In this sentence, do is an auxiliary verb and helps the main verb, to ask, to pose a question in the verb phrase: Do... have. Remember that verb phrases very often consist of two, three or four words to indicate tense, number or a question.

**Other auxiliary verbs**

Other auxiliary verbs are:

- **may**
- **might**
- **will**
- **would**
- **shall**
- **should**
- **can**
- **could**
- **must**
- **used (to)**
- **need**
- **ought (to)**

These are called **modal auxiliaries** because they show a degree of judgement about what is being done. These verbs do not exist in their own right as main verbs.

**I may have to change my plans. It might rain today, so that will spoil our trip. We shall have to think about what to do, because we must not waste the day.**

Here are some auxiliary verbs:

- **do**
- **have**
- **should**
- **would**
- **may**
- **might**
- **can**
- **could**

Read the following sentences. With a partner or on your own, decide which of these auxiliary verbs would fit into the gaps and make sense.

- a ________ you remember the fifth of November?
- b There ________ be trouble ahead.
- c ________ you bought any bananas today?
- d There’s no point in thinking about what ________ been.
- e I ________ go, if you ________ just say the word.
- f I ________ do my homework, because there ________ be an exam tomorrow.
- g ________ you ever been to Trinidad?

**Going further**

Read the following passage. You are given several choices of auxiliary verbs within a verb phrase. Choose the correct auxiliary in each case.

The test match can/could have been played, if the weather have/had been slightly better, but the rain were/was falling in the early morning and the ground staff should/could not do anything about it. The spectators were/was showing great patience, as most of them do/would have paid a lot for their tickets. Has/Do the cricket authorities have any solution to the problem? Would/Shall/Should people have their money returned if there is very little play? Does/Have the spectator have some rights? After all, cricket should/could not continue without people paying to watch.

**Further still**

Read the following news report. Pick out the errors in the use of auxiliary verbs in the verb phrases and correct them. You will either need to alter the tense of the verb or to replace it completely with a more appropriate auxiliary.

**NEWS ON-LINE SOUTH**

Holiday-makers was going about the business of enjoying themselves at Brighton yesterday, when what may happen but a real-life adventure. A pleasure boat, which have been blown off-shore, were having difficulties. There can be only one solution: there need to be a daring rescue. But might the lifeboat crew be assembled quickly? The answer should not has been clearer. Anxious spectators might only watch as the boat had launched. The winds may not but hamper their progress, but bravely they was sticking to their task. Finally, everyone did breathe easily again. The daring mission have been accomplished.