Modal auxiliaries

In English, we use modal auxiliary verbs to express ideas such as possibility, ability, obligation and compulsion. It is often possible to use the same auxiliary to express different ideas. For example, we can use ‘can’ to talk about ability and possibility.

Test your understanding of modal auxiliary verbs with this grammar exercise.

Complete the following sentences using appropriate modal auxiliary verbs. The idea that you should express is indicated in the brackets.

1. I .................. be there before 8 o’clock.  
   (compulsion)
   
   must  
   would  
   ought  
   will

2. ....................... you lend me a few dollars?  
   (polite request)
   
   Would  
   Could  
   Either could be used here

3. You ................... not have done this to me.  
   (criticism)
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should
would
Either could be used here

4. She ................. be driving now. (probability)

must
would
can

5. It ................... rain in the evening. (weak possibility)

might
can
may

6. You ................... not have waited for them. (lack of necessity)

need
can
may
must
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7. I wait any longer? (necessity)

Need
Can
May
Will

8. You to follow traffic rules. (obligation)

should
ought
must

9. I turn the heating on? (necessity)

Need
Should
Either could be used here

10. You have helped me. Why did you just sit and watch? (criticism)

should
could
Either could be used here
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Answers

1. I must be there before 8 o’clock. (compulsion)

2. Would / Could you lend me a few dollars? (polite request)

3. You should not have done this to me. (criticism)

4. She must be driving now. (probability)

5. It might rain in the evening. (weak possibility)

6. You need not have waited for them. (lack of necessity)

7. Need I wait any longer? (necessity)

8. You ought to follow traffic rules. (obligation)

9. Should / Need I turn the heating on? (necessity)

10. You could / should have helped me. Why did you just sit and watch? (criticism)