KR

KOREAN LESSON

Korean Grammar 2 · Chapter 9 · Can, Must, May, Seems

🚦 Ability, Obligation, Permission and Guessing — 가능, 의무, 허락, 추측

*These are the patterns that let you say what is **possible**, what you **must** do, what you **may** and **may not** do, and what you **think is probably the case**. Most are fixed phrases built on the modifier endings of Chapter 7 (-는, -(으)ㄴ, -(으)ㄹ) plus a noun-like word (수, 것, 터) and a closing verb (있다, 같다, 이다). Because the modifier changes with tense and word class, the key to this chapter is Chapter 7's table.*

THE SET AT A GLANCE

Can / cannot: -(으)ㄹ 수 있다/없다 · 못 · -지 못하다
Must / need to: -아/어야 하다/되다 · -(으)ㄹ 필요가 있다
May / may not: -아/어도 되다 · -(으)면 안 되다
Probably / seems: -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 · -나 보다 · -(으)ㄹ 텐데 · (worry) -(으)ㄹ까 봐

1. Ability and possibility: -(으)ㄹ 수 있다 / 없다

Put the **future modifier** -(으)ㄹ on the verb, then the pseudo-noun **수**, then 있다 ("there is a way") or 없다 ("there is no way"): **할 수 있어요** "I can do it", **먹을 수 없어요** "I can't eat it". ㄹ-stems keep the ㄹ (**만들 수 있어요**), and Chapter 3's irregulars change before the vowel (**추울 수**, **들을 수**, **도울 수**). Only 있다/없다 change for tense: the 수 part stays.

- **저도 그것을 할 수 있어요.** "I can do that too."
- **어렸을 때 저는 햄버거 다섯 개를 먹을 수 있었어요.** "When I was young I could eat five hamburgers."
- **내년에 캐나다에 갈 수 없을 거예요.** "I won't be able to go to Canada next year."
- **문을 열어 줄 수 있어요?** "Can you open the door (for me)?" — a polite request.

The particle can follow 수: **수가**, **수는**, **수도**. **그것을 어떻게 할 수가 있어요?** "How can you possibly do that?" shows 수가 adding emphasis. The same -(으)ㄹ 수 있다 also means "it is possible that…", which is why **비가 올 수 있어요** is "It may rain".

2. Cannot: 못 and -지 못하다

못 goes directly before the verb and says that something prevented you, or that you could not: **저는 그 동안 공부를 못 했어요** "I couldn't study during that time", **이 셔츠가 너무 작아서 못 입어요** "This shirt is too small, so I can't wear it". The longer form is **-지 못하다**: **이 문제를 이해하지 못했어요** "I didn't understand this problem". Compare **안** / **-지 않다**, a plain negative (you don't, by choice or fact): **저는 어제 시험을 안 봤어요** "I didn't take the test yesterday".

	안 / -지 않다	못 / -지 못하다	-(으)ㄹ 수 없다
Meaning	do not (plain negative)	could not (something prevented it)	cannot (general inability)
Example	**안 가요**	**못 가요**	**갈 수 없어요**

The difference between 못 and -(으)ㄹ 수 없다 is subtle: 못 is the colloquial, one-off "couldn't"; **-(으)ㄹ 수 없다** is a more general or formal "cannot". Watch the spacing: **잘 못 해요** (can't do it well) differs from **잘못 해요** (do it wrongly / by mistake), and **못하다** written as one word means "be bad at": **나는 수영을 못해** "I'm bad at swimming". 못 is not used with adjectives, so 못 + adjective is not a thing (general knowledge).

3. Must and need to

You met **-아/어야 하다** / **되다** in Chapter 6: stem + -아/어야 + 하다 (or 되다) means "have to". **가야 해요** / **가야 돼요** "I must go". Using 되다 instead of 하다 gives exactly the same meaning and is more usual in speech. Past: **그때 열심히 일해야 됐어요** "I had to work hard then"; future: **10분 후에 가야 될 거예요** "We'll have to go in ten minutes". The conversational shortening is **-아/어야지(요)**: **우리가 빨리 가야지!** "We have to hurry!", and **-아/어야겠다** expresses a decision reached on the spot: **나는 지금 가야겠다** "I'd better go now".

A second phrase is **-(으)ㄹ 필요가 있다** / **없다** "there is / is no need to": **나는 밥을 먹을 필요가 있어요** "I need to eat", **제자리에 놓을 필요가 없어요** "You don't need to put it back in its place". 필요하다 itself is an *adjective*, so the thing needed takes 이/가 and not 을/를: **나는 밥이 필요해요** "I need rice". The negative "must not" has its own form below; "must" is also expressed by a double negative, **-지 않으면 안 되다** "it won't do if you don't" (general knowledge).

4. Permission and "don't have to": -아/어도 되다

The ending **-아/어도** means "even if". Add 되다 (or 좋다, 괜찮다) and you get permission: **지금 문을 열어도 돼요** "You may open the door now", with the question **제가 일찍 가도 돼요?** "May I leave early?". Alternatives with the same sense: **열어도 괜찮아요** and **열어도 좋아요**. For 이다 use **-(이)어도 / -여도 / -(이)라도**. Past: **그때 나가도 되었어요** "It would have been fine if you'd left then"; future: **나가도 될 거예요**.

Put a negative before it and you get "don't have to": **내일까지 다 안 해도 돼요** "You don't need to do it all by tomorrow", **빨리 안 가도 돼** "You don't have to go quickly". It is the opposite of -아/어야 하다. The irregular stems change as before -아/어요: **추워도**, **몰라도**, **들어도**, **써도**.

5. Prohibition: -(으)면 안 되다

-(으)면 안 되다 "must not" is the ending -(으)면 (Chapter 5) plus 안 되다 "doesn't work": **그렇게 하면 안 돼요** "You must not do it like that", **이 차에 디젤을 넣으면 안 됩니다** "You must not put diesel in this car", **유아에게 그런 말을 하면 안 돼요** "You must not say that to a young child". A more formal "should not" is **-아/어서는 안 되다**: **밥을 많이 먹어서는 안 돼요** "You shouldn't eat a lot", **사람을 겉모습으로 평가해서는 안 돼요** "You shouldn't judge people by their looks".

As a question, the same phrase asks politely whether something is acceptable: **더 빨리 하면 안 돼요?** "Can't you do it faster?". The short answer "No" to a permission question is **안 돼요.** A related positive pattern is **-(으)면 되다** "it's enough if", used for advice: **서울역에서 내리면 됩니다** "You just get off at Seoul Station".

YOU WANT TO SAY	PATTERN	EXAMPLE
You may...	-아/어도 돼요	**앉아도 돼요**
You don't have to...	안 -아/어도 돼요	**안 와도 돼요**
You must...	-아/어야 해요/돼요	**와야 돼요**
You must not...	-(으)면 안 돼요	**앉으면 안 돼요**

6. Guessing: -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 and -(으)ㄴ/는 것 같다

-(으)ㄹ 것 같다 (future modifier + 것 + 같다 "seem") says that something is **probably going to happen or be the case**: **비가 올 것 같아요** "It looks like it will rain", **우리는 늦을 것 같아요** "We will probably be late", **문이 열려 있을 것 같아요** "The door is probably open". The subject can be anything. Other tenses use the Chapter 7 modifiers:

WHAT YOU GUESS	FORM	EXAMPLE
Future / likely	-(으)ㄹ 것 같다	**비가 올 것 같아요**
Present, verb (observing)	-는 것 같다	**엄마는 기다리고 있는 것 같아요** "Mum seems to be waiting"
Present, adjective	-(으)ㄴ 것 같다	**이 집은 큰 것 같아요**
Past, with evidence	-(으)ㄴ 것 같다	**친구가 간 것 같아요**
Past, a guess	-았/었을 것 같다	**아빠가 이미 냈을 것 같아요** "Dad probably already paid"
이다	-인 것 같다	**그 사람은 학생인 것 같아요**

The sources checked give the future-form examples and the 이다 and "mum seems to be waiting" and "dad probably paid" examples; the table's adjective and past-with-evidence rows follow the Chapter 7 modifier table. Do not say 그렇는 것 같아요: the adjective 그렇다 loses its ㅎ, giving **그런 것 같아요** (Chapter 3).

7. "It seems that...": -나 보다 / -(으)ㄴ가 보다

Another way to say "it seems, it appears" is **-나 보다** after a *verb* and **-(으)ㄴ가 보다** after an *adjective* or **-인가 보다** after 이다. The speaker has seen or heard evidence and infers the cause: **비가 오나 봐요** "It seems to be raining", **사람이 많은가 봐요** "There seem to be a lot of people", **학생인가 봐요** "(They) seem to be a student", **잤나 봐요** "(They) seem to have been asleep" (past -았/었나 보다). It is more observational than -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 and is not used to talk about your own feelings or plans. The sources checked do not cover this ending: it is from general knowledge.

8. Expectation and pity: -(으)ㄹ 텐데

-(으)ㄹ 텐데 is built from the pseudo-noun 터 + 이다 + -ㄴ데: always -ㄹ/을 + 터 + 이다 + ㄴ데. It says "it should be the case, and...", with a feeling of expectation, worry or "what a shame". It is a little more sure than -(으)ㄹ 것 같다:

- **비가 올 텐데** "It's probably going to rain (and so...)"
- **그가 집에 없을 텐데** "He probably isn't at home (but)..."
- **음식이 더 있으면 좋을 텐데** "It'd be good if there were more food (but there isn't)." (the author's gloss of the nuance)
- Connecting two clauses: **길이 막힐 텐데 지하철로 가요** "The roads will probably be jammed, so let's take the subway."

It is typically used when the speaker is *not* the one doing the action. One exception is the intention form **-(으)ㄹ 테니까** (here the speaker is the subject): **지금 갈 테니까 조금 더 기다려 주세요** "I'm leaving now, so please wait a little longer". Ending a sentence with **-(으)ㄹ 텐데요** leaves the thought hanging, soft and polite.

9. Worry: -(으)ㄹ까 봐

-(으)ㄹ까 봐 says "for fear that, in case": the first clause is what you are afraid of, and the second shows what you do or feel because of it. One source example, **집주인이 부서진 거울을 찾아낼까 봐 걱정돼요** "I'm worried that the landlord will find the broken mirror", appears only as a vocabulary example, so the rule is from general knowledge: vowel stem + -ㄹ까 봐, consonant stem + -을까 봐 (**늦을까 봐**, **잊을까 봐**). Another: **비가 올까 봐 우산을 가져왔어요** "I brought an umbrella in case it rained".

> **Watch out: 안 되다 vs 못 하다**
>
> **안 돼요** says something is *not allowed or not working* ("No"); **못 해요** says *you can't do it*. Compare: **여기서 사진을 찍으면 안 돼요** (not allowed) and **저는 사진을 못 찍어요** (I'm unable to take photos).

> **Watch out: the subject changes the guess**
>
> -(으)ㄹ 텐데 and -나 보다 are used to talk about *other people and situations*; about yourself, say **-(으)ㄹ 거예요** or **-겠-** (Chapter 4). **제가 갈 것 같아요** is possible, but it means "I guess I'll go"

(unsure).

🗣️ In Use — 실제 예문

① Can you? May I?

A:

김치를 만들 수 있어요? 제가 도와도 돼요?

Can you make kimchi? May I help?

B:

네, 도와 줘도 돼요. 하지만 매운 것은 먹을 수 없어요.

Yes, you may help. But I can't eat spicy things.

② Rules

A:

여기에서 사진을 찍으면 안 돼요. 그리고 신발을 벗어야 돼요.

You must not take photos here. And you have to take your shoes off.

B:

아, 알겠습니다. 가방은 안 가져가도 돼요?

Oh, understood. Don't I need to take my bag?

③ Guesses

A:

하늘을 보세요. 비가 올 것 같아요. 우산이 있어요?

Look at the sky. It looks like rain. Do you have an umbrella?

B:

저는 비가 올까 봐 우산을 가져왔어요. 밖에 사람이 많은가 봐요.

I brought one in case it rains. There seem to be a lot of people outside.

📋 Quick Reference — 요약표

MEANING	PATTERN	EXAMPLE
can	-(으)ㄹ 수 있다	**할 수 있어요**
cannot	-(으)ㄹ 수 없다 · 못 · -지 못하다	**할 수 없어요 · 못 해요**
must	-아/어야 하다/되다	**가야 돼요**
need to / no need	-(으)ㄹ 필요가 있다/없다	**갈 필요가 없어요**
may	-아/어도 되다	**가도 돼요**
don't have to	안 -아/어도 되다	**안 가도 돼요**
must not	-(으)면 안 되다	**가면 안 돼요**
probably	-(으)ㄹ 것 같다	**갈 것 같아요**
seems	-나 / -(으)ㄴ가 보다	**가나 봐요 · 큰가 봐요**
should (expectation)	-(으)ㄹ 텐데	**올 텐데**
in case / for fear	-(으)ㄹ까 봐	**늦을까 봐**

🖍️ Try It Yourself — 연습

Work out the answer first, then click to check.

1. Say "I can read Korean" and "I can't eat spicy food" (**읽다**, **먹다**).

▼ Show answer

한국어를 읽을 수 있어요. · **매운 음식을 먹을 수 없어요.**

2. Say "I can't make it" with 만들다 (ㄹ-stem) and with 못.

▼ Show answer

만들 수 없어요. · **못 만들어요.**

3. Say "We have to go now" in two ways.

▼ Show answer

지금 가야 해요. · **지금 가야 돼요.**

4. Ask "May I sit here?" and answer "Yes, you may" and "No, you mustn't".

▼ Show answer

여기에 앉아도 돼요? · **네, 앉아도 돼요.** · **아니요, 앉으면 안 돼요.**

5. Say "You don't have to come tomorrow."

▼ Show answer

내일 안 와도 돼요.

6. Say "It looks like it will be cold tomorrow" (**춥다**).

▼ Show answer

내일 추울 것 같아요. (ㅂ-irregular: 춥 → 추우 before -ㄹ)

7. Say "He seems to be tired" with -(으)ㄴ가 보다 (**피곤하다**) and "There seem to be a lot of people" with -나 보다 (**사람이 많이 오다**).

▼ Show answer

피곤한가 봐요. · **사람이 많이 오나 봐요.**

8. Say "I took an umbrella in case it rains" and "It's a pity there's not more food" (**음식이 더 있으면 좋다**).

▼ Show answer

비가 올까 봐 우산을 가져왔어요. · **음식이 더 있으면 좋을 텐데요.**

Coming up in Chapter 10: Sentence Endings and Putting It Together. The sentence-final endings -네요, -군요, -죠, -거든요, -잖아요, -는데요, -(으)ㄹ게요, -(으)ㄹ래요 and -(으)ㄹ까요, sentence-final nuance, and a recap of the whole course: the **Course Complete** chapter.

