An auxiliary verb is one which helps other verbs form tenses other than the simple present and simple past.

The following are the auxiliary verbs in English:

- **Be** and its forms: *is, am, are, was, were*
- **Do** and its forms: *does, did*
- **Have** and its forms: *has, had*
- **Shall**, **should; will, would**
- **Can, could; may, might**
- **Must; ought; dare; need**

Read the sentences given below.

Alice *is* reading a novel.
I *am* cooking dinner.
They *were* playing.
He *has* done wrong.
We *have* worked really hard.
They *did* not come in time.
How *are* you?
What *did* she say?

You will have noticed that in the sentences given above, the auxiliaries **be, do** and **have** merely express statements of fact. These three auxiliaries and their various forms are called **primary auxiliaries**.

Now read the following sentences:

He will come.
He may come.
She must come.
I should go.
You ought to go.
You need not go.

These sentences are not statements of fact. They, in fact, express actions or events that exist as conceptions of the mind - probabilities, possibilities, obligations, wishes, expectations etc. Several factors may prevent these actions or events from being fulfilled. Auxiliaries which help to express such conceptions of the mind are called **modal auxiliaries**.

Modal auxiliaries help to express the subjunctive and imperative moods. Note that sometimes modal auxiliaries are used to express simple futurity. Similarly, it is also possible for primary
auxiliaries to be used with modal force.

**Uses of the Primary Auxiliaries**

The primary auxiliaries (be, do and have) are used both as *principal verbs* and as auxiliaries. They are auxiliaries when they help other verbs to form their moods and tenses.

Read the sentences given below:

Alice *is* my sister.
She *is* knitting.

In the first sentence *is* is a principal verb as it says something about the subject without the help of any other verb. In the second sentence *is* is an auxiliary verb helping to form the present continuous tense of *knit*. More examples are given below:

She *has* two children.
They *have returned* home.

In the first sentence *has* is the principal verb. There are no other verbs in that sentence. In the second sentence *have* is an auxiliary verb helping to form the present perfect tense of *return*.

She *did* her work well.
When *did* he *return*?

In the sentence *She did her work well*, *did* is the principal verb whereas in the sentence *When did he return*, *did* is an auxiliary verb helping to ask a question in the simple past tense.