

Modal verbs in the past – use & examples

Level: C1

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Although the majority of modal verbs have no past form, it is possible to use them to refer to the past. It requires the usage of the so-called **perfect infinitive**, which is the construction of the **modal verb + have + past participle**.

MAY HAVE AND MIGHT HAVE

To express that something is probably happening now or will happen soon, we use the modal verb “**may**” or “**might**.”

Example:

He **may** be at home.
We **might** leave earlier.

If we want to say that something probably happened in the past, we use “**may have**” or “**might have**.”

MAY / MIGHT + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

He **may have** gone shopping.
I **might have** lost it somewhere.
She **may not have** met him before.

COULD HAVE

To make an assumption about the present and the future, instead of “**may/might**” we also use the weaker verb “**could**.”

Example:

She **could** be sleeping now.
They **could** be abroad.

However, when the same assumption applies to the past, we use "could have" form.

COULD + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

I **could have** lost the keys in the pub.

The form "could have" is also used when talking about something that could have happened, but did not.

Example:

You **could have broken** your leg!
I **could have gone** to the cinema, but I decided to stay home.

Whereas negative form "couldn't have" is used to talk about something that couldn't have happened and something impossible.

Example:

She **couldn't have met** him before. He used to live in Canada.
He **couldn't have gone** to the shopping centre. It's closed on Sundays.

MUST HAVE AND CAN'T HAVE

When we expressed certainty about an event or state, we use "must":

Example:

It's been such a long day. You **must** be tired.
If he's not at work or home, he **must** be in the gym.

The same situation, but in the past, is expressed by "must have":

MUST + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

You **must have** been tired.

He **must have** gone home.

In turn, the verb "can't" used in the present tense means that a situation is impossible.

Can't have, correspondingly, means that a situation could not have happened in the past:

CAN'T + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

She **can't have** been asleep. Her eyes were open.

You **can't have** seen Luke yesterday. He left the city six months ago.

SHOULD HAVE AND OUGHT TO HAVE

When giving advice or suggesting what seemed to be the best solution in a given situation, we use "should" or "ought to":

Example:

You **should go** there straight away.

I **ought to** spend more time with my family.

When we talk about what someone should have done in the past (but probably did not), we use "should have" or "ought to have":

SHOULD / OUGHT TO + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

You **should have** gone there straight away.

I **ought to have** spent more time with my family.