

Could Have, Should Have, Must Have – Past modals use & examples

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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**.

Modal + have + participle

Would have	Past unreal action	If I had known the future, I would have done it differently.
Could have	Past unreal ability	He could have taken the flight.
May have	Past unreal possibility	We may have passed the math exam, but it was in Spanish.
Might have	Past unreal small probability	You might have sold the car., if you really needed the Money.

Should have	Past unreal recommendation	You should have listened to the teacher.
Must have	Past unreal assumption	We must have been crazy!

MIGHT HAVE

MAY / MIGHT + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

To make an assumption/guess about the past.

If we want to say that something **probably happened** in the past, we use "might have"

I **might have** lost it somewhere.

I think/I suspect (probably) I was shopping at that time

I **might have** lost it somewhere.

I think/I suspect (probably) I lost it somewhere

She **may not have** met him before.

I think/I suspect (probably) they had never met before

COULD HAVE

COULD + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

1. To make an assumption/guess about the past.

Could have and **might have** can be interchangeable and mean the same thing

To make an assumption about the past, we also use "could have" form.

Example:

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

(probably) I lost my keys in the pub

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

(probably) I lost my keys in the pub

He **could have** got stuck in traffic.

He **might have** got stuck in traffic.

I think/I suspect

I think/I suspect

2. When something could have happened but did not.

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.

3. When something seems to be impossible.

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

MUST + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

When something certainly happened (certainty)

When we expressed certainty about an event or state, in the past we use “**must have**”:

Example:

You **must have** been tired.
He **must have** gone home.

CAN'T HAVE

CAN'T + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

To express past impossibility.

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:

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.

COULDN'T HAVE vs CAN'T HAVE

Can be used **interchangeably** – but **can't** is stronger, like impossible.

Example:

He couldn't have done it not able to)	Impossible that he did it. (He was
He can't have done it.	Impossible that he did it. (I know this!)

SHOULD HAVE & OUGHT TO HAVE

SHOULD / OUGHT TO + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Mean something that would have been a good idea, but that you didn't do it. It's like giving advice about the past when you say it to someone else, or regretting what you did or didn't do when you're talking about yourself.

When giving advice or suggesting

When giving advice or suggesting what seemed to be the best solution in a given situation in the past (but probably did not happen), we use "should have" or "ought to have":

Example:

You **should have** gone there straight away.
You **ought to have** spent more time with your family.

When talking about past mistakes

We use should have to talk about past mistakes.

Example:

I was so worried about you. You **should have** called!

Commonly used in apologies

Example:

I'm sorry that I'm late for work. I **should have** woken up earlier.

WOULD HAVE

WOULD + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Would have is a bit more difficult because it has **two** common structures. The first is with **but**.

1. To talk about something you wanted to do but didn't

Example:

I **would have** gone to the party, **but** I was really busy.
I **would have** called you, **but** I didn't know your number.
I **would have** loaned you the money, **but** I didn't have any.

2. Part of the third conditional

Example:

If I had had enough money, I **would have** bought a car
If I had known they were vegetarians, I **would have** made a salad.

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