

# The use of modal verbs to express the past

Level: C1

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1. MODAL VERBS IN THE PAST

## MODAL VERBS IN THE PAST

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

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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

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To assume the present and the future, instead of **may/might** we also use the 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 the USA.  
He **couldn't have** gone to the shopping centre. It's closed on Sundays.

### MUST HAVE AND CAN'T HAVE

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

Example:

It's been such a long day. You **must be** tired.

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

### MUST + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Example:

You must have been tired.

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

Example:

She **can't be** at home. I called by 5 minutes ago, and nobody answered the door.

**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.

### **SHOULD HAVE AND OUGHT TO HAVE**

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When we are 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 discover 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.