

Past Modals

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Grammar Notes

PAST MODALS

A. Introduction to Modals

Modals (also known as modal verbs) and modal expressions are words that come before the main verb and give it extra meaning.

Past modals and modal expressions are used in English to express advisability, possibility, certainty, ability, and necessity in the past.

We also use them for repeated past actions. Before you look at the charts in the next section, how many past modals can you think of?

B. Past Modal Pattern 1

Most past modals and past modal expressions are easily recognizable from this pattern: **modal + have + past participle (p.p.)**

Key

⊕ positive sentence ⊖ negative sentence ? question N/A not applicable (impossible or uncommon)

Meaning	Use	Modal	Example
Advisability	to make recommendations about what someone should have done instead	should + have + p.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Mae should have brought her resume to the interview. ⊖ Mae shouldn't have worn jeans to the interview. ? Should Mae have called someone to confirm the time of the interview?
		ought to + have + p.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ We ought to have entered the contest. ⊖ N/A* ? N/A



Grammar Notes cont.

B. Past Modal Pattern 1 cont.

Meaning	Use	Modal	Example
Possibility	to make a guess about possible past outcomes	might + have + p.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ He had lots of time yesterday, so he might have completed his project. ⊖ He didn't have much time yesterday, so he might not have completed his project. ⊙ N/A**
		may + have + p.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ They were talking about moving, so they may have put their house on the market. ⊖ They weren't sure if they wanted to move, so they may not have put their house on the market. ⊙ N/A
		could + have + p.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ I'm not sure where she is. She could have gone home. ⊖ N/A ⊙ She didn't look well. Could she have gone home?
Certainty	to express past outcomes that you're very sure about	must + have + p.p. (negative forms: must not, could not, or cannot)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Akira's car is gone. He must have gone home. ⊖ Akira's car is still here. He must not/ couldn't/can't have gone home.*** ⊙ N/A



Grammar Notes cont.

*Note #1

May have + p.p. (possibility) and *ought to have + p.p.* (advisability) are quite formal and not as common as the other options. It is better to use *might + have + p.p.* or *could + have + p.p.* for past possibility and *should + have + p.p.* for past advisability.

Note that *ought not to have + p.p.* is rarely used in American and Canadian English and is not included in the chart.

**Note #2

For questions that include a past modal of possibility, *could + have + p.p.* is the most common choice. Note that *might + have + p.p.* is possible for questions, but it is not commonly used in American and Canadian English. *May + have + p.p.* is never used for questions.

***Note #3

In most cases, there is a slight difference in meaning between *can't/couldn't have + p.p.* and *must not have + p.p.* (See Note #6 on page 7 for more information.)

We use *must not have + p.p.* when we're fairly sure about an outcome.

- He told me he wasn't feeling well yesterday, so he **must not have gone** to the party last night.

When we're very sure, it's better to use *couldn't have + p.p.* or *can't have + p.p.*

- I thought I saw my dog across the street, but he died two years ago so it **couldn't have been** him.

Note that while it is possible to contract *must not have + p.p.* to *mustn't have + p.p.*, it is formal and outdated in American and Canadian English. The contracted forms *couldn't have + p.p.* and *can't have + p.p.* are very common, however.

Note #4

The past modal pattern with *would* is common in third conditional sentences. The third conditional expresses an outcome that didn't happen but would have if certain conditions had been met in the past.

- ⊕ If you had included me in the memo, I **would have known** about the meeting.
- ⊖ He **wouldn't have been** late if his car hadn't broken down.
- ❓ **Would you have noticed** if I hadn't shown up yesterday?

Note #5

Would + rather + have + p.p. can be used to express preferences in affirmative past sentences. In questions, *would* and *wouldn't* are both possible. We use *wouldn't* when we are more certain that we know the person's answer.

- ⊕ I had to go to school yesterday, but I'd **rather have gone** to the beach.
- ❓ I hear you went shopping last night. **Would/ Wouldn't you rather have gone** to the movies?

Grammar Notes cont.

C. Past Modal Pattern 2

A few past modals and modal expressions follow the same pattern as present and future modals: **modal + base verb**.

Meaning	Use	Modal	Example
Ability	to show what someone was able to do in the past	could + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ I could cook when I was nine years old. ⊖ I couldn't cook when I was eight years old. ⊙ Could you cook when you were nine years old?
		was able to + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ I was able to finish my report last night. ⊖ I wasn't able to finish my dinner last night. ⊙ Were you able to finish your report last night?
Necessity	to express what was required of someone in the past	had to + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Komal had to retake his driver's test. ⊖ Komal didn't have to redo his homework. ⊙ Did Komal have to buy a new phone after he lost his other one?



Grammar Notes cont.

C. Past Modal Pattern 2 cont.

Meaning	Use	Modal	Example
Repeated Action	to express what someone did many times in the past	would + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ When I was young, I would often pretend I was a superhero. ⊖ I wouldn't go to church with my mother when I was a teenager. ⊙ Would you usually turn in your homework on time when you were in elementary school?
		used to + base verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ Lisa used to cry a lot when she was a toddler. ⊖ Lisa didn't use to smile very often when she was young. ⊙ Did Lisa use to have many temper tantrums as a child?



Grammar Notes cont.

C. Past Modal Pattern 2 cont.

Note #6

The meanings of past modals of necessity, certainty, and possibility are easier to understand on a scale. The percentage represents the likelihood that an action was performed in the past. Forms are contracted when it is common to do so.

Percentage	Positive Past Modals	Negative Past Modals
100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> had to + V 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> didn't have to + V
99%		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> couldn't + have + p.p. can't + have + p.p.
95%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> must + have + p.p. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> must + not + have + p.p.
50%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> could + have + p.p. might + have + p.p. may + have + p.p. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> might + not + have + p.p. may + not + have + p.p.

Note #7

The past modal "could" plays many different roles.
Before you read the following examples, can you name its roles?

- She **could speak** Arabic when she was seven years old. (ability)
- I'm not sure where she is. She **could have gone** home. (possibility)
- She **couldn't have gone** home because her purse is still on her desk. (certainty)

Exercise 1

MIXED MODALS

Circle the correct answer.

- Ex. I took time off work, so I _____ my friend while she was in the hospital.
- a) should visit
 - b) have to visit
 - c) was able to visit
1. Yumi is a great swimmer. In fact, she _____ when she was only four years old.
- a) could swim
 - b) can swim
 - c) might swim
2. Luca couldn't go to the game because he _____ .
- a) must have studied
 - b) had to study
 - c) couldn't study
3. _____ in Brazil?
- a) Did you used to live
 - b) May you have lived
 - c) Did you use to live
4. I'm not sure who that man was. It _____ Josephine's new boyfriend.
- a) should have been
 - b) might have been
 - c) shouldn't have been
5. The chicken was okay, but Rosa _____ the fish.
- a) would rather have had
 - b) should rather have had
 - c) could rather have had
6. I loved living in Miami. We _____ to the beach every day.
- a) would have gone
 - b) use to go
 - c) would go
7. _____ to call me back?
- a) Could he have forgotten
 - b) May he have forgotten
 - c) Must he have forgotten
8. Everyone on the team is smiling and laughing. They _____ the game.
- a) might have won
 - b) must have won
 - c) would win
9. It's too bad she moved away before you asked her out. You two _____ a great couple.
- a) must have made
 - b) can't have made
 - c) could have made
10. That horror movie was so bad. We _____ a comedy instead.
- a) were able to see
 - b) wouldn't rather have seen
 - c) should have seen

Exercise 2

POSSIBILITY, CERTAINTY & NECESSITY

Write what might or must have happened in each scenario using a past modal of possibility, certainty, or necessity. When you've finished writing, share your answers with your partner and justify why you chose a modal of possibility, certainty, or necessity for each one.

Ex. I'm not sure where Juan is. He was here this morning.

He could have gone out for lunch.

1. Did Nivaldo leave work early? He hasn't answered my email.

2. Hiro told me he felt dizzy during class.

3. Our teacher didn't give us any homework to do this weekend.

4. Someone left their bag on the floor.

5. I invited Francesca to my party, but she didn't come.

6. They're being evicted from their apartment.

7. I wonder why Michelle didn't call you back last night.

8. My son was really sick this morning.

9. Katarina failed her English test.

10. I saw something strange in the sky last night.

Exercise 3 (Student A)

PAIR WORK

Take turns reading out the following scenarios to your partner and ask what you should've done. Come up with your own scenarios for the last three.

Ex. A: I saw a child run into the street. What should I have done?

B: You should've yelled at the child to stop. Then you could've looked around for the child's parents.

1. I found a wallet on the street last night. What should I have done?
2. I saw a woman hitting her child in the store. What should I have done?
3. My friend refused to vote in the last federal election. What should I have done?
4. I saw someone throwing a cigarette butt out of their car window. What should I have done?
5. I saw my friend's girlfriend kissing another man. What should I have done?
6. A big man cut in front of me in line at the post office yesterday. What should I have done?
7. My sister interrupted me while I was telling a story to a group of friends. What should I have done?
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Exercise 3 (Student B)

PAIR WORK

Take turns reading out the following scenarios to your partner and ask what you should've done. Come up with your own scenarios for the last three.

Ex. A: I saw a child run into the street. What should I have done?

B: You should've yelled at the child to stop. Then you could've looked around for the child's parents.

1. I saw someone throwing empty plastic bags onto the street. What should I have done?
2. My friend told me a story, but I know for a fact that it wasn't true. What should I have done?
3. Someone was smoking next to me inside a restaurant even though it's illegal. What should I have done?
4. My bank put \$1,000 into my account in error. What should I have done?
5. I saw a skinny dog that looked cold and hungry outside my apartment building last night. What should I have done?
6. Someone cut me off while driving last night. What should I have done?
7. My friend was complaining about chest pains but didn't want to go to the hospital. What should I have done?
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Exercise 4

COMPLETE THE CHART

Complete the chart using the given verb and a suitable past modal or past modal expression.

#	Type of Modal	Verb	Sentence
Ex	Possibility	take	Reiko wasn't feeling well, so she <u>could have taken</u> some medicine.
1	Repeated Action	work	Sarah _____ for that furniture store, but she doesn't anymore.
2	Advisability	call	You _____ your mother. She was so worried!
3	Certainty	leave	This looks like Akmed's jacket. He _____ it behind.
4	Repeated Action	bake	When we were kids, our aunt _____ cookies for us whenever we visited her house.
5	Advisability	tell	You _____ Hye Eun about the party. It was supposed to be a surprise!



Exercise 4 cont.

#	Type of Modal	Verb	Sentence
6	Possibility	be	Someone left their book on the desk. It _____ Pavel.
7	Ability	run	When I was 15, I _____ five miles without stopping.
8	Advisability	drive	I heard you got a speeding ticket after work. You _____ home so fast!
9	Certainty	get	Mika _____ an A in history. She failed the last three tests!
10	Necessity	wake up	I went to bed early last night because I _____ at 5:00 am this morning.

Exercise 5

FIND THE ERROR

Find one error in each sentence. Rewrite the sentence correctly using a past modal or modal expression. There may be more than one possible answer.

Ex. That woman could have been Jun's grandmother. His grandmother passed away last month.

*That woman **couldn't have** been Jun's grandmother. His grandmother passed away last month.*

1. I couldn't go out last night because I must clean my house.

2. When I worked in a Cuban restaurant, I would have eaten Cuban food every day.

3. Where is the rest of the pizza? Who had to eat it?

4. It's a shame that Marla quit the company. If she hadn't, she could not have been a manager now.

5. The couch was pretty comfortable, but I would rather slept on the bed.

6. You couldn't have eaten so much at the party. That's why you feel sick now.

7. Jamal shouldn't left the party so early. Everyone started to dance after he left.

8. Because my brother-in-law works for Amazon, I was get a discount on a new TV.

9. Prisha must take the key. I don't see it anywhere.

10. Adele couldn't have continued working at this restaurant. She used to make a lot of money here.

Exercise 6

LISTENING

Listen to the scenarios. Then choose the most appropriate response.

Ex. Jian shouldn't have stayed out so late last night.

- a) He is exhausted today.
- b) He feels great today.
- c) He isn't tired today.

1. a) She couldn't watch her little sister.
b) She had to watch her little sister.
c) She must not watch her little sister.
2. a) You might not have driven fast.
b) You could have been driving that fast.
c) You shouldn't have been driving that fast.
3. a) I would arrive home by 10:00 pm.
b) I would arrive home by 7:00 pm.
c) I would arrive home by 6:00 pm.
4. a) She could eat four hot dogs.
b) She wouldn't have eaten four hot dogs.
c) She shouldn't have eaten four hot dogs.
5. a) He could play the piano when he was five years old.
b) He wasn't able to play the piano when he was five years old.
c) He must not have played the piano when he was five years old.
6. a) You shouldn't have eaten before we left.
b) You should have eaten before we left.
c) You must not eat before we left.
7. a) She would rather have taken a biology class.
b) She could rather have taken a biology class.
c) She should rather have taken a biology class.
8. a) His grades were so high that he must have found a job anywhere.
b) His grades were so high that he had to have found a job anywhere.
c) His grades were so high that he could have found a job anywhere.
9. a) If our best player hadn't been injured, we wouldn't have won.
b) If our best player hadn't been injured, we would have won.
c) If our best player hadn't been injured, we couldn't have won.
10. a) She passed her test.
b) She completed her test ahead of time.
c) She failed her test.

Exercise 7**WRITING**

Describe your childhood using past modals and modal expressions.

Example

I used to ride horses when I was a child. I could ride a horse by the time I was seven years old. Every day after school, I would go for a ride on our farm. Once, when I was nine, I fell off my horse. I shouldn't have tried to make my horse jump like that...

Exercise 8

QUIZ




Circle the best response. Note that there may be more than one possible answer. It is up to you to determine which choice is the most appropriate for each sentence.

1. Layla couldn't go out last night because she _____ for her history exam.
 - a) must have to study
 - b) must have studied
 - c) had to study
 - d) would have studied
2. You _____ three whole pizzas in five minutes. It is impossible to eat that fast!
 - a) could have eaten
 - b) couldn't have eaten
 - c) shouldn't have eaten
 - d) must have eaten
3. I am so tired now. I _____ a nap before we left.
 - a) should have taken
 - b) can't have taken
 - c) would have taken
 - d) couldn't have taken
4. Ken is really sick now. He _____ so much at the buffet this morning.
 - a) should have eaten
 - b) should not eat
 - c) shouldn't have eaten
 - d) should not eat
5. When I lived in Philadelphia, I _____ my bike to school.
 - a) used to ride
 - b) may have ridden
 - c) would not have ridden
 - d) would to ride
6. Why did Miguel choose to live in this inhospitable part of town? With the money he makes, he _____ a better apartment somewhere else.
 - a) didn't have to find
 - b) used to find
 - c) would not have found
 - d) could have found
7. She wasn't in class yesterday. _____ sick?
 - a) Had she to have been
 - b) Should she have been
 - c) Must she have been
 - d) Could she have been
8. Hilary Hahn is such a great violinist that she _____ long pieces when she was only eight.
 - a) couldn't play
 - b) had to play
 - c) must not have played
 - d) could play
9. When she lived in Brazil, Gisela _____ to work.
 - a) would walked
 - b) would walk
 - c) used to walked
 - d) used walk
10. The Italian restaurant was good, but I _____ to an Indian place.
 - a) should rather have gone
 - b) could rather have gone
 - c) would rather have gone
 - d) may rather have gone

Grammar Assessment

Student / Group: _____

Date	Level	Assessed By	Target	Skill
			Past Modals	Grammar

Criteria	Achieved 	Achieved with Help 	Needs Improvement 
knows the different types of past modals and modal expressions			
uses past modals and modal expressions correctly in affirmative sentences			
uses past modals and modal expressions correctly in negative sentences			
uses past modals and modal expressions correctly in questions			
knows the differences in meaning for past modals of necessity, certainty, and possibility			

Notes




Self-Assessment

PAST MODALS

Add check marks (✓) to show what you've learned in this lesson.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Can I...	Yes (very well) 	Yes (with help) 	Not yet 
recognize the different types of past modals and modal expressions?			
use past modals and modal expressions correctly in speaking?			
use past modals and modal expressions correctly in writing?			
form past modals and modal expressions correctly in questions and negative sentences?			
understand the differences in meaning for past modals of necessity, certainty, and possibility?			

My Notes

Answer Key

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

This lesson explores patterns and usage for past modals and modal expressions. Students practice expressing past ability, possibility, certainty, advisability, and necessity through various writing and speaking exercises. Mixed modal tasks are included.

NOTE:

This lesson describes common usage in American and Canadian English. If there are regional differences or if you teach in a different country, please point out the most common usage to your students.

LEVEL: High Int

TIME: 2–3 hours

TAGS: modals, past modals, past tense, modal verbs, could, should, would, might, may, used to, had to, was able to, should have, grammar, grammar practice

Exercise 1

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. a | 3. c | 5. a | 7. a | 9. c |
| 2. b | 4. b | 6. c | 8. b | 10. c |

Exercise 2

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct past modal formation and usage.

Exercise 3

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct past modal formation and usage.

Exercise 4

Answers may vary. Possible answers include:

- used to work
- should have called, ought to have called
- must have left
- would bake, used to bake
- shouldn't have told
- could have been, might have been, may have been
- could run, was able to run
- shouldn't have driven
- couldn't have gotten/got, can't have gotten/got, must not have gotten/got
- had to wake up

Exercise 5

Answers may vary.

- I couldn't go out last night because I **had to** clean my house.
- When I worked in a Cuban restaurant, I **would/used to eat** Cuban food every day.
- Where is the rest of the pizza? Who **could/might/may/would have** eaten it?
- It's a shame that Marla quit the company. If she hadn't, she **could/might/may have** been a manager now.
- The couch was pretty comfortable, but I would **rather have/have rather** slept on the bed.
- You **shouldn't** have eaten so much at the party. That's why you feel sick now.
- Jamal shouldn't **have** left the party so early. Everyone started to dance after he left.
- Because my brother-in-law works for Amazon, I **was able to/could get** a discount on a new TV.
- Prisha **must/might/could/may have taken** the key. I don't see it anywhere.
- Adele **should** have continued working at this restaurant. She used to make a lot of money here.

(continued on the next page...)

Answer Key cont.

Exercise 6

Transcript:

1. Victoria couldn't go to the movies last night.
2. I was driving way over the speed limit.
3. I used to take an English class on Mondays at 7:00 pm.
4. Amal has a bad stomachache.
5. Mozart was incredibly gifted.
6. I am so hungry now.
7. Sofia didn't enjoy her math class last semester.
8. It's really too bad that Simon chose to work for that awful company.
9. My team lost the championship game.
10. My sister should have studied for her test.

Answers:

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. b | 3. a | 5. a | 7. a | 9. b |
| 2. c | 4. c | 6. b | 8. c | 10. c |

Exercise 7

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct past modal formation and usage. As a follow-up task, have students read their essays out loud with their partners and have partners ask follow-up questions. You could also have partners read each other's essays and try to correct any errors they spot.

Exercise 8

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. c | 3. a | 5. a | 7. d | 9. b |
| 2. b | 4. c | 6. d | 8. d | 10. c |

Grammar Assessment

Use this tool for assessment purposes. Find Assessment Tools that you can personalize in our Resources section:

https://esllibrary.com/resource_categories/104/resources/2352

Self-Assessment

Have your students fill out this form.