

# Modal Verbs (Could): Possibility, Ability & Speculation

## INTERMEDIATE

Focus: Could as the past of can, Making polite suggestions, Degrees of certainty in the present, Could for unrealistic actions, Comparison: Can (realistic) vs. Could (unrealistic), Expressing hyperbolic states, Speculating about current events, General vs. specific possibility, Could vs. Might, Could have + past participle

At the Intermediate level, **Could** is one of the most versatile modal verbs. It is used for much more than just the past tense of "can." It expresses possibility, suggestions, politeness, and hypothetical situations.

### 1. Past Ability (General)

We use **could** to talk about general abilities we had in the past.

- *Positive*: "When I was young, I **could run** very fast."
- *Negative*: "I **couldn't speak** English until I was twelve."

### 2. Polite Suggestions & Requests

We use **could** to make suggestions or ask people to do things politely. It is softer and more polite than "can."

- *Suggestion*: "We **could go** to the cinema tonight if you are bored."
- *Request*: "**Could you open** the window, please?"

### 3. Possibility & Speculation (Present/Future)

We use **could** to say that something is possible now or in the future, but we are not certain. In this context, it is similar to **might**.

- *Speculation*: "Where is Jane? She **could be** in the garden." (Maybe she is there).
- *Future*: "Don't wait for me. I **could be** late."

### 4. Hypothetical & Hyperbolic Situations

We use **could** to talk about things that are possible in theory but unlikely in reality (unrealistic), or to exaggerate (hyperbole).

- *Hypothetical*: "I **couldn't live** in a city without a park." (Imagining a situation).
- *Hyperbole*: "I'm so hungry I **could eat** a horse!" (Exaggeration).

#### Comparison:

- **Can** is used for real, realistic possibilities. ("I can help you later.")
- **Could** is used for distant or theoretical possibilities. ("I could help, but I'm busy.")

### 5. Past Possibility (Modal Perfects)

To talk about possibility in the past, we use **could have + past participle (V3)**. This is used for:

1. **Things that were possible but didn't happen**: "He **could have won** the race, but he tripped."
2. **Past Deduction (Negative only)**: "He **couldn't have seen** us because it was dark." (It is impossible that he saw us).
3. **Guessing about the past**: "Where is my bag? I **could have left** it on the bus."

# Practice Exercises

---

## A. Fill in the Blanks

**Instruction:** Complete the sentences using **could**, **couldn't**, or **could have / couldn't have** + the verb in brackets. Pay attention to the time context (past, present, or hypothetical).

1. When my grandfather was alive, he \_\_\_\_\_ (speak) five languages fluently.
  2. I looked everywhere for my glasses, but I \_\_\_\_\_ (not/find) them.
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ (you/help) me with this heavy box, please?
  4. Don't eat that mushroom! It \_\_\_\_\_ (be) poisonous.
  5. That exam was incredibly difficult. I \_\_\_\_\_ (not/pass) it even if I had studied for a month!
  6. \_\_\_\_\_ (we/go) to the Italian restaurant tonight? It's just a suggestion.
  7. You were driving too fast on that icy road. You \_\_\_\_\_ (kill) someone!
  8. The thief \_\_\_\_\_ (not/enter) through the door because it was locked from the inside.
  9. Where is Tom? \_\_\_\_\_ (he/be) in the library studying?
  10. I simply \_\_\_\_\_ (not/believe) it when she told me the news yesterday.
  11. I'm so tired right now that I \_\_\_\_\_ (sleep) for a whole week.
  12. \_\_\_\_\_ (you/ride) a bicycle when you were four years old?
  13. We didn't know you were in town. We \_\_\_\_\_ (invite) you to the party if we had known.
  14. She \_\_\_\_\_ (not/know) about the surprise party; it was a total secret!
  15. How \_\_\_\_\_ (he/forget) his own anniversary? That's terrible!
-

## **| Answer Key**

1. could speak
2. couldn't find
3. Could you help
4. could be
5. couldn't have passed / couldn't pass (Hypothetical past or Conditional)
6. Could we go
7. could have killed (Past possibility/risk)
8. couldn't have entered (Past negative deduction)
9. Could he be
10. couldn't believe (Past ability/reaction)
11. could sleep (Hyperbole/Hypothetical)
12. Could you ride
13. could have invited (Past missed opportunity)
14. couldn't have known (Past negative deduction)
15. could he forget / could he have forgotten (Both possible depending on if the focus is the act or the result)