

Past modals

English B2

What this topic teaches

Modals talk about the present: *It might rain*. To talk about the **past**, English adds *have + participle*: the **past modals**, *must have*, *can't have*, *may/might have*, *should have*, *could have*.

- Deduction : *He **must have** missed the bus*. (He's not here; the evidence is clear.)
- Impossibility: *He **can't have** missed the bus. It hasn't arrived yet*.
- Blame and regret: *You **should have** called me*. (You didn't. We waited.)
- Memory hook: the modal is a detective, and *have + participle* is its time machine. *must have* = the detective is sure; *can't have* = the detective rejects; *might have* = the detective shrugs.

The deduction scale

Modal	The detective says	Example
must have	I'm sure it happened	She must have studied. The test was perfect.
may/might/could have	possibly it happened	He might have forgotten. He does that.
can't have	it surely didn't happen	They can't have left already – the lights are on.

- Δ The opposite of *must have* is **can't have**, not "*mustn't have*". *Mustn't* forbids; *can't have* deduces impossibility. "*He mustn't have missed the bus*" $\times$ – the detective says *can't have*.
- *could have* does double duty: possibility (*He could have forgotten*) and unused ability (*I could have won!* – the talent was there; the trophy wasn't).

should have: the blame tense

should have + participle = the right thing didn't happen. *shouldn't have* = the wrong thing did.

- *You should have studied*. (You didn't. The test noticed.)
- *You shouldn't have eaten my noodles*. (You did. I noticed.)
- – *You should have revised*. The ... structure is exactly this: the unlived correct past.

- Register: *should have* is how friends express disappointment and how teachers mark essays. Both are permanent records.

The forms: same machinery for everyone

- Modal + *have* + participle, every person, no changes: *I must have, she must have, they must have.*
- Questions: *Could he have forgotten? Should I have called?* – the modal flips, as always.
- Negatives: *can't have, shouldn't have, might not have.*
- △ Pronunciation: *have* compresses to a soft “uhv”: *should've, could've, would've.* And that sound is why people write “*should of*” ×. It is never *of*. The detective weeps.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **The Chinese deduction words don't move the verb.** maps straight onto *He must have missed the bus* – but only if *have* is present. “*He must have missed*” needs all three links.
- △ ***can't have* vs *mustn't have*.** The forbidden/deduction split from A2 returns with a past tense. *You mustn't smoke here* (a rule) vs *You can't have smoked here* (a deduction – the ashtray is clean).
- △ **Regret ≠ deduction.** *I should have called* (blame) vs *I must have called* (deduction: the phone bill says so). One scolds, one deduces; don't send the detective to do the scolding.
- △ ** would've, not “would of”.** Writing *should of* tells the reader you learned English by ear alone. Write *should have*; say *should've*.

Say it aloud

Play detective with the classroom evidence.

- The teacher is smiling. She must have read our essays. Or she hasn't read them yet. Both are possible; one is hopeful.
- He can't have finished the homework. The ink is still wet from the shop where he bought the pen.
- I should have slept earlier. I shouldn't have watched that last episode. The episode was worth it. The detective disagrees.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *He isn't here. He _____ (miss) the bus – I'm sure. – must have missed.* The detective is sure.
2. *They _____ (leave) already – the lights are on. – can't have left.* The detective rejects.
3. *You _____ (call) me yesterday. I waited. – should have called.* The blame tense.
4. *"He mustn't have passed."* – $\times \rightarrow$ **He can't have passed.** Deduction takes *can't have*.
5. *I could _____ (win), honestly. – have won.* Unused ability: the talent was there; the trophy wasn't.