

# Past modals

English Grammar · B2

## must have / can't have (Speculation)

### Past modals

| must have                | should have                  | might have                       |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| sure deduction           | regret                       | possibility                      |
| <i>He must have left</i> | <i>I should have studied</i> | <i>They might have missed it</i> |

Past modals: reference card grid

When speculating about the **past**, use **modal verb + have + past participle**.  
When you are certain:

- **must have + past participle**: Must have been... (in the past).
- **can't have + past participle**: Cannot have been... (in the past).

He must have forgotten.

*He must have forgotten. (A definite positive speculation about the past)*

She can't have seen us.

*She can't have seen us.*

**Note:** Negative speculation uses **can't have**, not *mustn't have*.

## should have (Regret, Criticism)

**should have + past participle** indicates "should have done but didn't"

I should have studied harder.

*I should have studied harder. (Regret)*

You shouldn't have said that.

*You shouldn't have said that. (Criticism)*

**Note:** It refers to something not done (or done) in the past that is now regretted.

## could have / might have (Possibility)

**could have / might have + past participle** indicates something that was **possible** in the past (but not certain).

They might have missed the train.

*They may have missed the train.*

It could have been worse.

*Things could have been worse.*

**Note:** could have can also mean “**could have done but didn't**”: *I could have helped, but I didn't.* (I could have helped, but I didn't.)

### Common Errors

- × ~~He must forgot.~~ → ✓ He **must have forgotten**. — Speculation about the past requires “modal + have + past participle”; there is no form like “must forgot”.
- × ~~I should have went.~~ / Mishearing as oral speech ~~should of gone~~ → ✓ I should **have gone**. — After have comes the past participle; connected speech sounds like “of,” but it must be written as “have.”
- × ~~I could help you yesterday, but I was busy.~~ → ✓ I **could have helped** you yesterday... — “Could have done” expresses “could have but didn't”; could + base verb only expresses general ability in the past.
- × ~~You should had called.~~ → ✓ You should **have** called. — After a modal verb always comes the base form “have,” never “had.”