

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."