

‘Should’, ‘would’ and ‘could’

are auxiliary verbs that can sometimes get confusing. They are the past tense of ‘shall’, ‘will’ and ‘can’ but are also used in other situations.

‘Should’ can be used:

1. To express something that is probable

Examples:

“John should be here by 2:00 PM.”

“He should be bringing Jennifer with him.”

2. To ask questions

Examples:

“Should we turn left at this street?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for work?”

3. To show obligation, give recommendation or even an opinion

Examples:

“You should stop eating fast food.”

“You should go for walks more often.”

“We should go to the park tomorrow.”

“He should go to the pharmacy first thing in the morning.”

‘Would’ can be used:

1. To ask ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘why’ or ‘how’ (not always, but often)

Examples:

“How would you do that?”

“What would you do if...”

“When would we have time to do that?”

“Who would want to wait in that line?”

2. To make a polite request

Examples:

“Would you like any tea?”

“Would you like anything else?”

3. In hypothetical situations

Examples:

“If I had a lot of money I would like to own a farm one day.”

“I would love to buy a boat one day.”

4. To ask questions

Examples:

“Would you like fries or salad?”

“Would you like to join us tonight?”

‘Could’ can be used:

1. To suggest a possibility

Examples:

“Whose journal is this? It could be Nelly’s journal.”

“Could ‘A’ be the answer? It’s definitely not ‘B’ or ‘D.’”

2. To make a polite request

Examples:

“Could you please move this box?”

“Could you please pass that paper?”

Using the word ‘could’ to respond to the requests we made in the last example would suggest that you *could* do it, but you might not really want to. If you agree to the request, then you use the word ‘can’.

Examples:

“Could you please move this box?” “I could, but I am really busy right now.”

“Could you please pass that paper.” “Sure, I can.”

These past modal verbs are all used hypothetically, to talk about things that didn't really happen in the past.

Could have + past participle

1: **Could have + past participle** means that something was possible in the past, or you had the ability to do something in the past, but that you didn't do it.

- I could have stayed up late, but I decided to go to bed early.
- They could have won the race, but they didn't try hard enough.
- Julie could have bought the book, but she borrowed it from the library instead.
- He could have studied harder, but he was too lazy and that's why he failed the exam.

Couldn't have + past participle means that something wasn't possible in the past, even if you had wanted to do it.

- I couldn't have arrived any earlier. There was a terrible traffic jam (= it was impossible for me to have arrived any earlier).
- He couldn't have passed the exam, even if he had studied harder. It's a really, really difficult exam.

2: We use **could have + past participle** when we want to **make a guess** about something that happened in the past. In this case, we don't know if what we're saying is true or not true. We're just talking about our opinion of what maybe happened.

Why is John late?

- He could have got stuck in traffic.
- He could have forgotten that we were meeting today.
- He could have overslept.

We can also choose to use **might have + past participle** to mean the same thing:

- He might have got stuck in traffic.
- He might have forgotten that we were meeting today.
- He might have overslept.

Should have + past participle

1: **Should have + past participle** can mean something that would have been a good idea, but that you didn't do it. It's like giving advice about the past when you say it to someone else, or regretting what you did or didn't do when you're talking about yourself.

Shouldn't have + past participle means that something wasn't a good idea, but you did it anyway.

- I should have studied harder! (= I didn't study very hard and so I failed the exam. I'm sorry about this now.)
- I should have gone to bed early (= I didn't go to bed early and now I'm tired).
- I shouldn't have eaten so much cake! (= I did eat a lot of cake and now I don't feel good.)
- You should have called me when you arrived (= you didn't call me and I was worried. I wish that you had called me).
- John should have left early, then he wouldn't have missed the plane (= but he didn't leave early and so he did miss the plane).

2: We can also use **should have + past participle** to talk about something that, if everything is normal and okay, we think has already happened. But we're not certain that everything is fine, so we use 'should have' and not the present perfect or past simple. It's often used with 'by now'.

- His plane should have arrived by now (= if everything is fine, the plane has arrived).
- John should have finished work by now (= if everything is normal, John has finished work).

We can also use this to talk about something that would have happened if everything was fine, but hasn't happened.

- Lucy should have arrived by now, but she hasn't.

Would have + past participle

1: Part of the third conditional.

- If I had had enough money, I would have bought a car (but I didn't have enough money, so I didn't buy a car).

2: Because 'would' (and will) can also be used to show if you want to do something or not (volition), we can also use **would have + past participle** to talk about something you wanted to do but didn't. This is very similar to the third conditional, but we don't need an 'if clause'.

- I would have gone to the party, but I was really busy.
(= I wanted to go to the party, but I didn't because I was busy. If I hadn't been so busy, I would have gone to the party.)
- I would have called you, but I didn't know your number.
(= I wanted to call you but I didn't know your number, so I didn't call you.)
- A: Nobody volunteered to help us with the fair
B: I would have helped you. I didn't know you needed help.
(= If I had known that you needed help, I would have helped you.)