

## could (do) and could have (done)

## A

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can** (see Unit 26):

- ☐ Listen. I **can hear** something. (*now*)
- ☐ I listened. I **could hear** something. (*past*)

But **could** is not always past. We also use **could** for possible actions now or in the future, especially to make suggestions. For example:

- ☐ A: What shall we do tonight?  
B: We **could go** to the cinema.
- ☐ A: When you go to Paris next month,  
you **could stay** with Sarah.  
B: Yes, I suppose I **could**.

**Can** is also possible in these sentences ('We can go to the cinema.' etc.). **Could** is less sure than **can**.



## B

We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions that are not realistic. For example:

- ☐ I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*not I can sleep for a week*)

Compare **can** and **could**:

- ☐ I **can stay** with Sarah when I go to Paris. (*realistic*)
- ☐ Maybe I **could stay** with Sarah when I go to Paris. (*possible, but less sure*)
- ☐ This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here for ever. (*unrealistic*)

## C

We also use **could** (*not can*) to say that something is possible now or in the future:

- ☐ The story **could be** true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)
- ☐ I don't know what time Lisa is coming. She **could get** here at any time.

Compare **can** and **could**:

- ☐ The weather **can** change very quickly in the mountains. (*in general*)
- ☐ The weather is nice now, but it **could** change later. (*the weather now, not in general*)

## D

We use **could have** (done) to talk about the past. Compare:

- ☐ I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*now*)  
I was so tired, I **could have slept** for a week. (*past*)
- ☐ The situation is bad, but it **could be** worse. (*now*)  
The situation was bad, but it **could have been** worse. (*past*)

Something **could have** happened = it was possible, but did *not* happen:

- ☐ Why did you stay at a hotel? You **could have stayed** with me.
- ☐ David was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's all right.

## E

I **couldn't do** something = it would not be possible:

- ☐ I **couldn't live** in a big city. I'd hate it. (= it wouldn't be possible for me)
- ☐ Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't be** better.

For the past we use **couldn't have** ... (= would not have been possible):

- ☐ We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.

Note that 'I **couldn't do** something' has two meanings:

(1) I **couldn't** = it would not be possible now, I would not be able:

- ☐ I **couldn't run** ten kilometres now. I'm not fit enough. (= I would not be able)

(2) I **couldn't** = I was not able (past)

- ☐ I **couldn't run** yesterday because I'd hurt my leg. (= I was not able)



can and could → Unit 26

couldn't have (done) → Unit 28B

could and might → Unit 29C

could I/you ... ? → Unit 37

could with if → Units 38C, 39E, 40D

Modal verbs (can/will etc.) → Appendix 4

## must and can't

A Study this example:

My house is very near the motorway.

It **must be** very noisy.We use **must** to say that we believe something is certain:

- ☐ You've been travelling all day. You **must be** tired.  
(travelling is tiring and you've been travelling all day, so you **must be** tired)
- ☐ 'Joe is a hard worker.' 'Joe? You **must be joking**. He doesn't do anything.'
- ☐ Louise **must get** very bored in her job. She does the same thing every day.

We use **can't** to say that we believe something is not possible:

- ☐ You've just had lunch. You **can't be** hungry already.  
(we don't expect people to be hungry immediately after a meal)
- ☐ They haven't lived here for very long. They **can't know** many people.

The structure is:

you/she/they (etc.)	<b>must can't</b>	<b>be</b> (tired / hungry / at work etc.) <b>be -ing</b> (doing / going / joking etc.) <b>get / know / have</b> etc.
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B Study this example:

There's nobody at home. They **must have gone** out.

Martin and Lucy expected their friends to be at home.

They rang the doorbell twice, but nobody has answered. Lucy says:

They **must have gone** out.  
(= there is no other possibility)For the past we use **must have ...** and **can't have ...**:

- ☐ I lost one of my gloves. I **must have dropped** it somewhere.  
(that's the only explanation I can think of)
- ☐ 'We used to live very near the motorway.' 'Did you? It **must have been** noisy.'
- ☐ Sarah hasn't contacted me. She **can't have got** my message.
- ☐ Max walked into a wall. He **can't have been looking** where he was going.

The structure is:

I/you/he (etc.)	<b>must can't</b>	<b>have</b>	<b>been</b> (asleep / at work etc.) <b>been -ing</b> (doing / looking etc.) <b>gone / got / known</b> etc.
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You can use **couldn't have** instead of **can't have**:

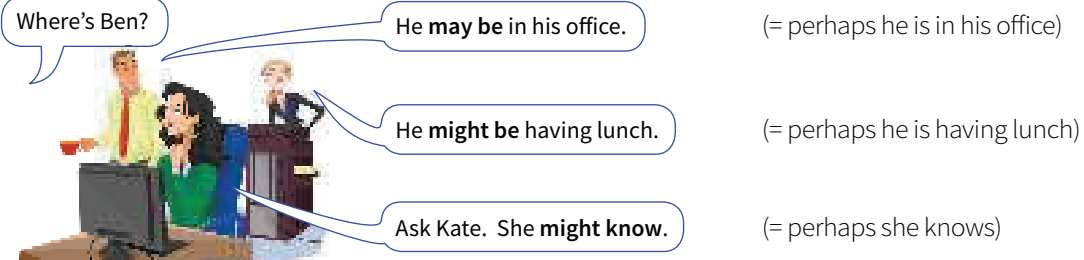
- ☐ Sarah **couldn't have got** my message.
- ☐ Max **couldn't have been looking** where he was going.

## may and might 1

## A

Study this example situation:

You are looking for Ben. Nobody is sure where he is, but you get some suggestions.



Where's Ben?

He **may** be in his office. (= perhaps he is in his office)

He **might** be having lunch. (= perhaps he is having lunch)

Ask Kate. She **might** know. (= perhaps she knows)

We use **may** or **might** to say that something is possible. You can use **may** or **might**:

- ☐ It **may** be true. or It **might** be true. (= perhaps it is true)
- ☐ She **might** know. or She **may** know.

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not**:

- ☐ It **may not** be true. (= perhaps it isn't true)
- ☐ She **might not** know. (= perhaps she doesn't know)

I/you/he (etc.)	<b>may</b> <b>might</b>	(not)	<b>be</b> (true / in his office etc.) <b>be -ing</b> (doing / working / having etc.) <b>know / work / want</b> etc.
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Note the difference between **may be** (2 words) and **maybe** (1 word):

- ☐ It **may be** true. (**may** + verb)
- ☐ 'Is it true?' '**Maybe**. I'm not sure.' (**maybe** = it's possible, perhaps)

## B

For the past we use **may have ...** or **might have ...**:

- ☐ A: I wonder why Kate didn't answer her phone.  
B: She **may have been** asleep. (= perhaps she was asleep)
- ☐ A: I can't find my phone anywhere.  
B: You **might have left** it at work. (= perhaps you left it at work)
- ☐ A: Why wasn't Amy at the meeting yesterday?  
B: She **might not have known** about it. (= perhaps she didn't know)
- ☐ A: I wonder why David was in such a bad mood yesterday.  
B: He **may not have been feeling** well. (= perhaps he wasn't feeling well)

I/you/he (etc.)	<b>may</b> <b>might</b>	(not) have	<b>been</b> (asleep / at home etc.) <b>been -ing</b> (doing / working / feeling etc.) <b>known / had / wanted / left</b> etc.
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## C

**could** is similar to **may** and **might**:

- ☐ It's a strange story, but it **could be** true. (= it is possible that it's true)
- ☐ You **could have left** your phone at work. (= it's possible that you left it there)

But **couldn't** (negative) is different from **may not** and **might not**. Compare:

- ☐ Sarah **couldn't have received** my message. Otherwise she would have replied.  
(= it is not possible that she got my message)
- ☐ Why hasn't Sarah replied to my message? I suppose she **might not have received** it.  
(= it's possible that she didn't receive it – perhaps she did, perhaps she didn't)

## may and might 2

## A

We use **may** and **might** to talk about possible actions or happenings in the future:

- ☐ I haven't decided where to go on holiday. I **may go** to Ireland. (= perhaps I will go there)
- ☐ Take an umbrella with you. It **might rain** later. (= perhaps it will rain)
- ☐ The bus isn't always on time. We **might have** to wait a few minutes. (= perhaps we will have to wait)

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not (mightn't)**:

- ☐ Amy **may not go** out tonight. She isn't feeling well. (= perhaps she will not go out)
- ☐ There **might not be** enough time to discuss everything at the meeting. (= perhaps there will not be enough time)

Compare:

- ☐ I'm **going** to buy a car. (for sure)
- ☐ I **may buy** a car. or I **might buy** a car. (possible)

## B

Usually you can use **may** or **might**. So you can say:

- ☐ I **may go** to Ireland. or I **might go** to Ireland.
- ☐ Jane **might be** able to help you. or Jane **may be** able to help you.

But we use **might (not may)** when the situation is *not real*:

- ☐ If they paid me better, I **might** work harder. (*not* I may work)

This situation (**If they paid** me better) is not real. They do *not* pay me well, so I'm not going to work harder.

## C

Compare **may/might be -ing** and **will be -ing**:

- ☐ Don't phone at 8.30. I'll **be watching** the football on TV.
- ☐ Don't phone at 8.30. I **might be watching** the football on TV. (= perhaps I'll be watching it)

We also use **may/might be -ing** for possible plans. Compare:

- ☐ I'm **going** to Ireland soon. (for sure)
- ☐ I **might be going** (or I **may be going**) to Ireland soon. (possible)

## D

## might as well

Helen and Clare have just missed the bus.  
The buses run every hour.

What shall we do? Shall we walk?

We **might as well**. It's a nice day and I don't want to wait here for an hour.

We **might as well** do something = we should do it because there is no better alternative.  
There is no reason not to do it.

You can also use **may as well**.



- ☐ A: What time are you going out?  
B: Well, I'm ready, so I **might as well go** now. or ... I **may as well go** now.
- ☐ Buses are so expensive these days, you **might as well get** a taxi. (= taxis are as good, no more expensive than buses)