

Could (do) and could have (done)

A

We use **could** in a number of ways. 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 only used in this way. We also use **could** to talk about 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**.

What shall we
do tonight?

We **could go** to the cinema.



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 (a situation or a happening) is possible now or in the future. The meaning is similar to **might** or **may** (see Unit 29):

- ☐ 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. (*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 when you were in Paris? You **could have stayed** with Sarah. (*you didn't stay with her*)
- ☐ David was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's OK.

E

We use **couldn't** to say that something 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 (done)**:

- ☐ We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.
- ☐ The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have gone** anyway because he was ill. (= it would not have been possible for him to go)