

GRAMMAR

Past modals of deduction

LEVEL

Upper-Intermediate
(B2)

NUMBER

EN_B2_1102G

LANGUAGE

English

Learning outcomes

- I can identify the past modals of deduction and explain their uses.
- I can speculate about actions in the past using a range of modals of deduction.

Past modals of deduction

We can use **modal verbs** to make **deductions** about actions or happenings in the past.

We can also call them modals of past probability.



A tsunami? Gosh, that **must have been** terrifying!



Deduction = using the available information to make a guess or draw a conclusion.



Must have

- We use **must have** + **past participle** when we feel **certain** about what happened.

Situation

Expression

I arrive at my friend John's house. He doesn't answer the door when I ring the bell and his car is gone.

"Oh, he must have gone out!"
(=this is the only explanation I can think of)

I send a present to a friend in Canada. It doesn't arrive after 6 weeks.

"It must have got lost in the post!"

Can't or couldn't have

- We use **can't have** + **past participle** when we feel something **wasn't possible**.
- We use **couldn't have** + **past participle** in the same way.

Situation

I'm at the office and need to talk to my colleague Sue. I can't find her, but I see her handbag is still on her desk.

Expression

"She **can't have left** the office yet!"

I go on holiday and miss a friend's party. Another friend later says they saw me at the party.

"It **couldn't have been** me! I was in Spain that weekend."



Match the sentence with the next one

1 That jacket you bought looks very high quality.

2 Sarah was in a tricky situation when she lost her job.

3 I haven't seen my neighbour for a few days.

4 I've lost my watch.

5 Tim is an extremely careful driver.

a He must have gone away.

b It can't have been easy for her.

c It must have been very expensive.

d He couldn't have crashed his car.

e I must have dropped it somewhere.



Complete with *must have* or *can't have*

Do the activity on your own. Then, **compare** answers in **breakout rooms**.

1 I haven't seen Antonio working at the bar in ages. He (change) jobs. > He must have changed jobs.

2 I had lunch with Tracey on Saturday afternoon, so she (be) with you!

3 I can't find my phone. I (leave) it at home.

4 Tina looks very tired. She (sleep) very well last night.

5 You (walk) that entire distance. It's so far!

6 I love your new dress! It (be) so expensive.



Might or may have

- We use **might have** or **may have** + **past participle** when we think it's **possible** that something happened.
- The negative forms are **might not have** or **may not have**.

Situation

I'm at the office and need to talk to my colleague Sue. I can't find her, but I see her laptop is still on her desk.

Expression

She **might have gone** out to buy a coffee.

Yesterday, I called my friend Mohammed, but he didn't answer his phone.

He **may have been** asleep.



Could have

- We also use **could have** + **past participle** to mean something was **possible**.

Situation

Expression

I'm at the office and need to talk to my colleague Sue. I can't find her but I see her laptop is still on her desk.

She **could have gone** out to buy a coffee.

Yesterday, I called my friend Mohammed, but he didn't answer his phone.

He **could have been** asleep.

What might have happened?

1 You see your friend with a broken arm.



She might have fallen off her bike again!

2 Your colleague seemed stressed this morning.



3 Two of your friends end their relationship.



4 Your car has a flat tyre and a broken window.



5 Your phone suddenly stops working.



6 Your neighbour is no longer friendly to you.





Couldn't have vs might or may not have

- Be careful though!
- *Couldn't have* does not mean the same as *might* or *may not have*.

Sentence	Meaning
I couldn't have been at the office that day.	It's not possible that I was at the office.
I might not have been at the office that day.	Perhaps I was at the office, perhaps I wasn't.





Fill in the gaps

Use *might have been* or *couldn't have been*. **Explain** your choice.



Who was that man we saw with Penelope?

I'm not sure. It _____ her boyfriend.



No, it _____. Her boyfriend has short hair.



Oh, really? I have no idea then!



Choose the correct option

1 He _____ misunderstood my directions. Why else would he be late?

a. must have

b. can't have

2 She _____ gone to the beach. She hates sand!

a. might have

b. can't have

3 I _____ written the number down incorrectly. That number doesn't exist.

a. must have

b. may have



Choose the correct option

4 They _____ been at the restaurant yesterday, but I didn't see them.

a. must have

b. may have

5 John _____ been so happy when he bought his first car. He's always wanted one!

a. may have

b. must have

6 - Where's Jill?
- She _____ gone into town. Are her car keys still there?

a. might have

b. can't have



Write a text

Aim to write 40-50 words.

- Choose one of the situations from slide 10.
- Write a text to a friend telling them what you think has happened.

A large, white sheet of paper with horizontal lines, resembling a notepad or a piece of paper for writing. It has a blue tab on the top left corner.

End of the lesson

Idiom

to bet your bottom dollar

Meaning: to say you are certain about something

Example: You can **bet your bottom dollar** it was Jack who arrived last.



Additional practice



Underline the correct option

- 1 Tom didn't come to the party on Saturday, so he *must* / *can't* have been busy that day.
- 2 Leanne can't find her glasses. She *might* / *couldn't* have left them at the restaurant.
- 3 Alisha missed her train this morning. She *can't* / *must* have got to work on time this morning.
- 4 Pamela is really smart. She *must* / *might* have passed all her exams with top marks.
- 5 Leicester Square is down there. We *can't* / *may* have passed it already!





Fill in the gaps



1 Nobody knows why he died. We think it _____ been an accident.

a. can't have

b. may have

2 Will didn't eat any of the food we prepared. He _____ liked it!

a. might have

b. might not have

3 Sarah looked so happy yesterday. She _____ finally passed her driving test!

a. must have

b. can't have





Write a past modal of deduction

Use *must have*, *might / may have*, *could have* or *can't have*.

The streets are wet this morning.

My friend Ben hasn't arrived yet.

Dianne looked very ill at work today.

My computer isn't booting up.



Answer key

P. 6: 1. c, 2. b, 3. a, 4. e, 5. d

P. 7: 2. She can't have been
3. I must have left
4. She can't have slept
5. You can't have walked
6. It must have been

P. 12: 1. Might have been
2. Couldn't have been.

P. 13-14: 1. a, 2. b, 3. a, 4. b, 5. b, 6. a

P. 19: 1. must
2. might
3. can't
4. must
5. can't

P.20: 1. b, 2. b, 3. a



Summary

Past modals of deduction

- We can use **modal verbs** to make **deductions** about actions or happenings in the past.
- A deduction involves using the available information to make a guess or draw a conclusion.
- *A tsunami? Gosh, that **must have been** terrifying!*

Must have and can't/couldn't have

- **Must have + past participle** means we feel **certain** about what happened: *He **must have** gone out!*
- **Can't/couldn't have + past participle** means something **wasn't** possible: *It **couldn't have** been me!*

Might/may/could have

- **Might/may have + past participle** means it's **possible** it happened: *She **may have** gone out!*
- **Could have + past participle** also means something was **possible**: *She **could have** gone out!*

Might/may not have vs couldn't have

- Be careful! **Might/may not have + past participle** means **perhaps**: *I **might not have** known him!*
- Whereas **couldn't have + past participle** means it **wasn't possible**: *I **couldn't have** known him!*



Vocabulary

deduction

tricky

ages

entire

flat tyre



Notes

