

# Could

## Introduction



**Could** you explain that again, please?

## Uses

Use	Examples
<b>The past tense of can for ability</b>	I <b>could</b> play the piano when I was young but I <b>can't</b> now. <b>Could</b> you swim when you were a child?
<b>The past tense of 'can't' for possibility - couldn't</b>	I <b>couldn't</b> go to the party on Saturday because my parents were visiting.
<b>The past tense of can for permission</b>	We <b>couldn't</b> leave early on Friday - the boss made us stay to finish the report.
<b>Possibility now or in the future</b>  <b>Only the affirmative and interrogative forms are used.</b>	"Where's Lionel?" "I'm not sure. He <b>could</b> be in a meeting room - I'll have a look."  We <b>could</b> play tennis tomorrow.  <b>Could</b> we do this tomorrow or will you be busy?
<b>Polite requests - the same as can but a little more polite and formal</b>  <b>We can make this even more polite by using a sentence with a question tag.</b>	<b>Could</b> you lend me Â€20 till Friday?  You <b>couldn't</b> help me with this, <b>could</b> you?

<b>Unrealistic situations</b>	<b>I love this place - I <b>could</b> stay here forever.</b> <b>I <b>couldn't</b> work for your boss - he's far too demanding.</b>
<b>As 'would be able to' in conditional sentences</b>	<b>If we had more people available, we <b>could</b> finish this by Friday.</b> <b>If we lived in the country, we <b>couldn't</b> go to the theatre as often as we do.</b>
<b>With 'I wish'. This is an example of an unreal <b>conditional</b> situation.</b>	<b>I wish I <b>could</b> find another job - I'm so bored here.</b>
<b>Suggestions</b>	<b>"Where do you want to eat tonight?"</b> <b>"We <b>could</b> go to the pub as usual or how about trying that new Chinese place?"</b>

## The present continuous

**Could** can also be followed by the **present continuous** when talking about possibility. For example:

They **could** be having lunch now; it's half past twelve.

Gilbert **could** be taking the train to the airport tomorrow. Or maybe he'll drive there as usual. [present continuous for future plans]

## 'Could' or 'can' for possibility

- Can** is more certain and realistic:

We **can** discuss it with Nick when we see him next week.  
[We know we're going to see Nick and maybe he's already agreed to discuss this issue.]

**Could** expresses some doubt:

We **could** discuss it with Nick next time we see him.  
[This is possible but there is no plan to do this. It is more like a suggestion.]

2. **Could** is used for hypothetical possibility whereas **can** reflects a general possibility:

**It could** be a mistake to invest in this kind of project.  
 [If we choose to invest, it might go well and it might not.]

**It can** be a mistake to invest in this kind of project.  
 [It is sometimes a mistake to do this.]

3. We use 'can't' rather than **couldn't** to express something that is theoretically or actually impossible:

She **can't** be working late - her shop closes at 17.30.  
 He **can't** finish the report this afternoon - he's gone to a meeting.

4. We use **could** when something is possible now or in the future:

She **can't** be working late - her shop closes at 17.30.  
 This **could** be our best solution but I'm not sure yet.  
 I don't know when the strike will finish but it **could** be any time now.

## 'Could' for permission

When we talk about permission to do something in the past, we can use **could** or 'was allowed to':

When I lived in this town, we **could**/were allowed to park in the High Street.

But if we mention one particular occasion, we are more likely to use 'was allowed to':

It was an emergency so he was allowed to park there for two hours.

In negative sentences, **couldn't** or 'wasn't allowed to' can be used in either situation:

When we were children, we **couldn't**/weren't allowed to play in the park after 7pm.  
 We had a lot of extra work last week so we **couldn't**/weren't allowed to leave early.

## 'Could' or 'was able to' for ability

'Was able to' is an alternative to **could** as the past tense of **can**. Sometimes they are interchangeable but there are situations in which one of them is preferred or only one is correct.

1. **Could** is more likely to be used with some **stative verbs**:

**Could** you understand him?  
 I **couldn't** believe what she told me!

**I couldn't think why she did that.**

2. **Could** is more likely to be used for general ability, although 'was able to' is also possible but if we talk about a specific incident or achievement, we only use 'was able to':

We miss having Stuart in the office - he **could**/(was able to) fix any IT problem.  
All our computers crashed yesterday but Barney was able to fix the problem.

## 'Could' or 'may/might' for possibility

For possibility, **could** and **might/may** and are not always interchangeable because **could** has two meanings:

1. 'Can achieve - able to be done or achieved, or able to exist'

The three words are not interchangeable when we are talking about possibility in this way:

"We **could** play tennis today" = all the right conditions exist - we have enough time, we have a tennis court nearby, etc. We have the ability to play if we want to.

"We **might/may** play tennis today" = we are considering playing tennis but we are not sure.

2. 'Not certain - that might or might not happen'

Here, they are interchangeable. In these sentences, we could also use 'maybe' or 'perhaps'.

For example, the following sentences all have the same meaning - there is a possibility

that John is in the boardroom:

John **could** be in the boardroom.

John **might** be in the boardroom.

John **may** be in the boardroom.

Maybe John is in the boardroom.

Perhaps John is in the boardroom.

## Examples



She **couldn't** play tennis with her friends last summer.



When I was a teenager, I **could** stay out late at weekends but I **couldn't** go out with my friends on school nights.



"Where do you want to go?" "We **could** go to the cathedral - it's not far. Or we **could** have lunch first and do that later."



**Could** you take me to the station, please?



I wish I **could** play the piano but I don't have time to learn.



It **could** be raining this weekend. Shall we postpone the barbecue?

## Some common expressions

Expression	Meaning	Examples
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'couldn't help' + gerund/'it'	<p><b>Used to talk about something we <b>couldn't</b> prevent or stop ourselves doing.</b></p> <p>With 'noticing', it suggests an apology for making a personal comment that might not be appreciated.</p>	<p><b>I tried to stay awake until the end of the meeting but I <b>couldn't</b> help falling asleep.</b></p> <p><b>I <b>couldn't</b> help noticing that you're not getting on well with the new manager - what's the problem?</b></p>
<p><b>subject + 'could always' + bare infinitive</b></p> <p><b>Note that 'always' does not have its usual meaning in this expression.</b></p>	<p><b>To make a suggestion.</b></p> <p>Sometimes the word 'always' adds little extra meaning but it can be used when offering a different or alternative suggestion, often an easy option - a way of saying 'don't forget about...'</p>	<p>"My computer's crashed." "Why don't you call the helpdesk?" "I did but they're busy." "Well you <b>could</b> always try rebooting it - that usually works for me."</p> <p>"Let's have something simple for dinner - I don't feel like cooking." "Well, we <b>could</b> always go out if you prefer."</p>
<p><b>subject + 'couldn't be bothered' (+ infinitive or gerund)</b></p>	<p><b>To indicate a lack of motivation.</b></p>	<p>I wish I'd finished this yesterday but I was tired and I <b>couldn't</b> be bothered. This casserole should have garlic in it but I didn't have any and I <b>couldn't</b> be bothered to go/going out for some.</p>
<p><b>subject + 'couldn't care less'</b></p>	<p><b>To show that we do not care at all about something.</b></p>	<p>He <b>couldn't</b> care less if he upsets people - he's so insensitive.</p>
<p><b>Could it be that..?</b></p>	<p><b>Is it possible that..?</b></p> <p>It can be used for past, present or future situations.</p> <p>It is sometimes used in a sarcastic way.</p>	<p><b>Could it be that I was wrong about him?</b></p> <p><b>Could it be that I'm finally beginning to understand this?</b></p> <p><b>Could it be that we'll actually finish on time today?!</b></p>

**subject + 'couldn't believe' + object**

**To express surprise.**

**He *couldn't* believe it when his boss told him he was fired.**

**She *couldn't* believe what she heard about him.**



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