

Could

Introduction



Could you explain that again, please?

Uses

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

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

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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| <p>'couldn't help' + gerund/'it'</p> | <p>Used to talk about something we couldn't prevent or stop ourselves doing. With 'noticing', it suggests an apology for making a personal comment that might not be appreciated.</p> | <p>I tried to stay awake until the end of the meeting but I couldn't help falling asleep.</p> <p>I couldn't help noticing that you're not getting on well with the new manager - what's the problem?</p> |
| <p>subject + 'could always' + bare infinitive Note that 'always' does not have its usual meaning in this expression.</p> | <p>To make a suggestion.</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 could 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 could always go out if you prefer."</p> |
| <p>subject + 'couldn't be bothered' (+ infinitive or gerund)</p> | <p>To indicate a lack of motivation.</p> | <p>I wish I'd finished this yesterday but I was tired and I couldn't be bothered. This casserole should have garlic in it but I didn't have any and I couldn't be bothered to go/going out for some.</p> |
| <p>subject + 'couldn't care less'</p> | <p>To show that we do not care at all about something.</p> | <p>He couldn't care less if he upsets people - he's so insensitive.</p> |
| <p>Could it be that..?</p> | <p>Is it possible that..?</p> <p>It can be used for past, present or future situations.</p> <p>It is sometimes used in a sarcastic way.</p> | <p>Could it be that I was wrong about him?</p> <p>Could it be that I'm finally beginning to understand this?</p> <p>Could it be that we'll actually finish on time today?!</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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