

Could

Introduction



Could you explain that again, please?

Uses

Use	Examples
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?

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

1. **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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