

# Could

## Introduction



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

## Uses

Use	Examples
The past tense of <b>can</b> for ability	I <b>could</b> play the piano when I was young but I can't now. <b>Could</b> you swim when you were a child?
The past tense of 'can't' for possibility - <b>couldn't</b>	I <b>couldn't</b> go to the party on Saturday because my parents were visiting.
The past tense of <b>can</b> for permission	We <b>couldn't</b> 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 <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?
Polite requests - the same as <b>can</b> but a little more polite and formal  We can make this even more polite by using a sentence with a <b>question tag</b> .	<b>Could</b> you lend me €20 till Friday?  You <b>couldn't</b> help me with this, <b>could</b> you?

Unrealistic situations	I love this place - I <b>could</b> stay here forever. I <b>couldn't</b> work for your boss - he's far too demanding.
As 'would be able to' in conditional sentences	If we had more people available, we <b>could</b> finish this by Friday. If we lived in the country, we <b>couldn't</b> go to the theatre as often as we do.
With 'I wish'. This is an example of an unreal <b>conditional</b> situation.	I wish I <b>could</b> find another job - I'm so bored here.
Suggestions	"Where do you want to eat tonight?" "We <b>could</b> 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><b>'couldn't help' + gerund/'it'</b></p>	<p>Used to talk about something we <b>couldn't</b> prevent or stop ourselves doing.</p> <p>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 <b>couldn't</b> help falling asleep.</p> <p>I <b>couldn't</b> help noticing that you're not getting on well with the new manager - what's the problem?</p>
<p>subject + <b>'could always'</b> + <b>bare infinitive</b></p> <p><b>Note that</b> '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."</p> <p>"Why don't you call the helpdesk?"</p> <p>"I did but they're busy."</p> <p>"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."</p> <p>"Well, we <b>could</b> always go out if you prefer."</p>
<p>subject + <b>'couldn't be bothered'</b> (+ <b>infinitive</b> or <b>gerund</b>)</p>	<p>To indicate a lack of motivation.</p>	<p>I wish I'd finished this yesterday but I was tired and I <b>couldn't</b> be bothered.</p> <p>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>subject + <b>'couldn't care less'</b></p>	<p>To show that we do not care at all about something.</p>	<p>He <b>couldn't</b> care less if he upsets people - he's so insensitive.</p>
<p><b>Could</b> 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><b>Could</b> it be that I was wrong about him?</p> <p><b>Could</b> it be that I'm finally beginning to understand this?</p> <p><b>Could</b> 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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