

# Beginner

## The Use of Could (do) and could have (done)

### RULES AND EXAMPLES

A: We use **could** in a number of ways. Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**:

**Examples:**

Listen. I **can** hear something. (*now*)

I listened . I **could** hear something. (*past*)

But **could** is not only used in this way. We also use **could** to talk about possible actions *now* or *in the future* (especially to make suggestions).

**For example:**

A: What shall we do this evening?

B: We **could** go to the cinema.

A: When you go to Paris next month, you could **stay with** Julia.

B: Yes, I suppose I **could**.

**Can** is also possible in these sentences ('We **can** go to the cinema, etc.). With **could**, the suggestion is less sure.

B. We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions which are not realistic. For example:

I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*not I can sleep for a week*)

Compare **can** and **could**:

I **can stay** with Julia when I go to Paris. (realistic)

Maybe I **could stay** with Julia when I go to Paris. (possible, but less sure)

This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here for ever. (unrealistic)

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C: We also use **could** (*not can*) to say that something is possible now or in the future.

The meaning is similar to **might** or **may**:

### Examples:

The story **could be** true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)

I don't know what time Liz is coming. She **could get** here at any time.

D: We use **could have** (done) to talk about the past. Compare:

1. I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*now*)  
I was so tired I **could have slept** for a week. (*past*)
2. The situation is bad, but it **could be** worse. (*now*)  
The situation was bad, but it **could have been** worse. (*past*)

Something **could have** happened = it was possible but it did *not* happen:

1. Why did you stay at a hotel when you were in Paris? You **could have stayed** with Julia. (you didn't stay with her)
2. I didn't know that you wanted to go to the concert. I **could have got you** a ticket. (I didn't get you a ticket)
3. Dave was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's OK.

E. We use **couldn't** to say that something would not be possible now:

1. I **couldn't live** in a big city. I'd hate it. (= it wouldn't be possible for me)
2. Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't be** better.

For the past we use **couldn't have** (done):

1. We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.
2. The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have gone** anyway because he was ill. (= it would not have been possible for him to go)