

Could (do) and could have (done)

A

We use **could** in a number of ways. Sometimes **could** is the past of **can** (see Unit 25C):

- Listen. I **can** hear something. (*now*)
- I listened. I **could** hear something. (*past*)

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

What would you like to do tonight?

We could go to the movies.



- A: What would you like to do tonight?
- B: We **could** go to the movies.
- It's a nice day. We **could** go for a walk.
- When you go to New York next month, you **could** stay with Candice.
- A: If you need a car, you **could** borrow Lauren's.
- B: Yes, I guess I **could**.

Can is also possible in these sentences (We **can** go for a walk, etc.). **Could** is less sure than **can**. Use **could** (*not can*) when you don't really mean what you say. For example:

- I'm so angry with him. I **could** kill him! (*not I can kill him!*)

B

We also use **could** to say that something is possible now or in the future:

- The phone is ringing. It **could** be Alex. (*not It can be Alex*)
- I don't know when they'll be here. They **could** get here at any time.

Can is not possible in these examples. In these sentences **could** is similar to **might** (see Units 28–29):

- The phone is ringing. It **might** be Alex.

C

Compare **could** (do) and **could have** (done):

- I'm so tired. I **could** sleep for a week. (*now*)
- I was so tired. I **could have** slept for a week. (*past*)

We normally use **could have** (done) for things that were possible but did not happen:

- Why did you stay at a hotel when you went to New York? You **could have** stayed with Candice. (= you had the opportunity to stay with her, but you didn't)
- Dave fell off a ladder yesterday, but he's all right. He's lucky – he **could have** hurt himself badly. (but he didn't hurt himself)
- The situation was bad, but it **could have** been worse.

D

Sometimes **could** means "would be able to":

- We **could** take a trip if we had enough money. (= we would be able to go away)
- I don't know how you work so hard. I **couldn't** do it.

Could have (done) = would have been able to (do):

- Why didn't Liz apply for the job? She **could have** gotten it.
- We **could have** taken a trip if we'd had enough money.
- The trip was canceled last week. I **couldn't** have gone anyway because I was sick. (= I wouldn't have been able to go)

Exercises

26.1 Answer the questions with a suggestion. Use *could* and the words in parentheses.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Where should we go for the long weekend? | (to San Antonio) <u>We could go to San Antonio.</u> |
| 2. What should we have for dinner tonight? | (fish) We _____. |
| 3. What should I give Amy for her birthday? | (a book) You _____. |
| 4. When should I call Angela? | (now) _____. |
| 5. When should we go and see Tom? | (on Friday) _____. |

26.2 Put in *can* or *could*. Sometimes either word is possible.

- “The phone is ringing. Who do you think it is?” “It could be Alex.”
- I’m really hungry. I _____ eat a horse!
- If you’re very hungry, we _____ have dinner now.
- It’s so nice here. I _____ stay here all day, but unfortunately I have to go.
- “I can’t find my bag. Have you seen it?” “No, but it _____ be in the car.”
- David is a good musician. He plays the flute, and he _____ also play the piano.
- “What do you want to do?” “There’s a movie on television. We _____ watch that.”
- The weather is nice now, but it _____ change later.

26.3 Complete the sentences. Use *could* or *could have* + an appropriate verb.

- A: What should we do this evening? B: I don’t know. We could go to the movies.
- A: I was so bored at home last night.
B: Why did you stay at home? You _____ to the movies.
- A: There’s an interesting job advertised in the paper. You _____ for it.
B: What kind of job is it? Show me the ad.
- A: Did you go to the concert last night?
B: No. We _____, but we decided not to.
- A: Where should we meet tomorrow?
B: Well, I _____ to your house if you want.

26.4 Read this information about Ken:

Ken didn’t do anything on Saturday night.	Ken ran out of money last week.
Ken doesn’t know anything about machines.	Ken’s car was stolen on Monday.
Ken had Monday afternoon off.	Ken had to work Friday night.

Some people wanted Ken to do different things last week, but they couldn’t contact him. You have to say whether he could have done or couldn’t have done them.

- Ken’s aunt wanted him to drive her to the airport on Tuesday.
He couldn’t have driven her to the airport (because his car had been stolen).
- A friend of his wanted him to go out for dinner on Friday night.
Ken _____.
- Another friend wanted him to play tennis on Monday afternoon.
Ken _____.
- Jack wanted Ken to lend him \$50 last week.
_____.
- Lisa wanted Ken to come to her party on Saturday night.
He _____.
- Ken’s mother wanted him to fix her washing machine.
_____.