

## could (do) and could have (done)

## A

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can** (see Unit 26):

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

But **could** is not always past. We also use **could** for possible actions now or in the future, especially to make suggestions. For example:

- ☐ A: What shall we do tonight?  
B: We **could go** to the cinema.
- ☐ A: When you go to Paris next month,  
you **could stay** with Sarah.  
B: Yes, I suppose I **could**.

**Can** is also possible in these sentences ('We can go to the cinema.' etc.). **Could** is less sure than **can**.

What shall we  
do tonight?

We **could go** to the cinema.



## B

We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions that 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 Sarah when I go to Paris. (*realistic*)
- ☐ Maybe I **could stay** with Sarah when I go to Paris. (*possible, but less sure*)
- ☐ This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here for ever. (*unrealistic*)

## C

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

- ☐ The story **could be** true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)
- ☐ I don't know what time Lisa is coming. She **could get** here at any time.

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

- ☐ The weather **can** change very quickly in the mountains. (*in general*)
- ☐ The weather is nice now, but it **could** change later. (*the weather now, not in general*)

## D

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

- ☐ I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*now*)  
I was so tired, I **could have slept** for a week. (*past*)
- ☐ 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 did *not* happen:

- ☐ Why did you stay at a hotel? You **could have stayed** with me.
- ☐ David was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's all right.

## E

I **couldn't do** something = it would not be possible:

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

For the past we use **couldn't have** ... (= would not have been possible):

- ☐ We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.

Note that 'I **couldn't do** something' has two meanings:

- (1) I **couldn't** = it would not be possible now, I would not be able:
  - ☐ I **couldn't run** ten kilometres now. I'm not fit enough. (= I would not be able)
- (2) I **couldn't** = I was not able (past)
  - ☐ I **couldn't run** yesterday because I'd hurt my leg. (= I was not able)

## Exercises

## 27.1 Which goes with which?

- 1 What shall we eat tonight?
- 2 I need to phone Vicky sometime.
- 3 What shall I get Ann for her birthday?
- 4 Where shall we put this picture?
- 5 What would you like to do at the weekend?
- 6 I don't know what to wear to the wedding.

- a We could go away somewhere.
- b You could give her a book.
- c ~~We could have fish.~~
- d You could wear your brown suit.
- e You could do it now.
- f We could hang it in the kitchen.

- 1 c
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....
- 5 .....
- 6 .....

27.2 Put in **can** or **could**.

- 1 This is a wonderful place. I could stay here forever.
- 2 I'm so angry with him. I ..... kill him!
- 3 I ..... hear a strange noise. What is it?
- 4 It's so nice here. I ..... sit here all day but unfortunately I have to go.
- 5 I ..... understand your point of view, but I don't agree with you.
- 6 Peter is a keen musician. He plays the flute and he ..... also play the piano.
- 7 The company Amy works for isn't doing well. She ..... lose her job.
- 8 Some people are unlucky. Life ..... be very unfair.
- 9 I've been really stupid. I ..... kick myself.
- 10 Be careful climbing that tree. You ..... fall.

## 27.3 Complete the sentences. Choose from:

**gone**  
**have moved**

**could be**  
**could have**

**could come**  
**could have come**

~~**could sleep**~~  
~~**could have been**~~

- 1 A: Are you tired?  
B: Yes, very tired. I feel as if I could sleep for a week.
- 2 A: I spent a very boring evening at home yesterday.  
B: Why did you stay at home? You ..... out with us.
- 3 A: Shall I open this letter?  
B: Yes. It ..... important.
- 4 A: How was your exam? Was it difficult?  
B: It wasn't so bad. It ..... worse.
- 5 A: I got very wet walking home in the rain.  
B: Why did you walk? You ..... taken a taxi.
- 6 A: Where shall we meet tomorrow?  
B: Well, I ..... to your office if you like.
- 7 A: Does Tom still live in the same place?  
B: I'm not sure. He could .....
- 8 A: Did you go to university?  
B: No. I could have ....., but I didn't want to.

27.4 Complete the sentences. Use **couldn't** or **couldn't have** + these verbs (in the correct form):**afford****be**~~**be**~~~~**live**~~**manage****stand****study****wear**

- 1 I couldn't live in a big city. I'd hate it.
- 2 We had a really good holiday. It couldn't have been better.
- 3 I ..... that hat. People would laugh at me.
- 4 You helped me a lot. I ..... without you.
- 5 The staff at the hotel were really good. They ..... more helpful.
- 6 There's no way we could buy a car now. We ..... it.
- 7 Jack prepared for the exam as well as he could. He ..... harder.
- 8 I wouldn't like to live near the motorway. I ..... the noise of the traffic.