Would have, Could have, Should have

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Modal verbs are an unavoidable part of English grammar. We use them to express modality – ability, likelihood, advice, order, suggestion, capacity, permission, request, and obligation.

In today's lesson, we will look at some modal verbs in the past. As a rule, they express our present feelings about our past actions.

The structure we use to express it is:

WOULD/COULD/SHOULD + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

1

WOULD HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

You probably find this construction familiar from the third conditional. It is about an unreal situation that didn't happen. In most cases, it expresses regret.

For example:

- *If I had known you were in the hospital, I **would have visited** you. (but I didn't know and I didn't visit you.)*
- *I **would have prepared** a bigger meal if I had known you were coming. (but I didn't know and I didn't prepare it).*
- *John **would have passed** the exam if he had studied harder. (but he didn't study so he couldn't pass his exam).*

You can also use ***would have + past participle*** to talk about something you wanted to do but for some reason but you didn't. Here, the sentence other than *would have + past participle* is in the Past Simple Tense.

For example:

- *I **would have gone** to Martha's birthday party but I had to study for my exam. (I wanted to go to the party but I didn't)*
- *Sam **would have picked you up** but her car broke down. (She wanted to pick them us but she couldn't).*
- *They **would have gone clubbing** with us last night but they had guests around. (They wanted to go clubbing but they couldn't).*

COULD HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

Could have means that something might have happened in the past but it didn't. These sentences usually contain regret.

Look at these examples:

- *We **could have got married** and have a family of our own. (but they didn't get married).*
- *I **could have graduated** from college but I left it and got a job instead.*
- *You **could have been** rich but you didn't work hard enough.*

You can also the construction ***could have + past participle*** to make an assumption about something that happened in the past.

For example:

- *Where is my wallet? I could have left it in the car. (I might have left it in the car).*
- *“Why is the window open? The children could have opened it. (The children might have opened it).*
- *Can it be that Sam is late? He could have been stuck in the traffic. (Sam might have been stuck in the traffic).*

Remember that ***couldn’t have + past participle*** has the opposite meaning. It expresses something that couldn’t have happened but it did.

For example:

- *Where is Kevin? He couldn’t have forgotten about our arrangement. (It is unlikely that he forgot but he did).*

- *Pamela couldn't have arrived any earlier because of the traffic. (she planned to be on time but because of the traffic she wasn't).*
- *I couldn't have called you because I lost my phone. (I wanted to call you but I lost my phone).*

SHOULD HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE

The modal verb ***should*** is normally used to give advice or recommendation. However, when used in the past, it becomes complaining or regret.

Look at these sentences:

- *I **should have gone** to bed earlier. Now I'm sleepy.*
- *You **should have called** me before you decided to go shopping.*
- *They **should have called** the police when they saw the car had been robbed.*
- *I **should have listened** to you. Now I'm sorry I didn't.*

Shouldn’t have + past participle means that something was a bad idea but it was done anyway.

For example:

- *You **shouldn’t have gone** without me (you should have called me)*
- *I **shouldn’t have stayed up** so late. (now I’m tired)*
- *You **shouldn’t have drunk** so much at the party. Who’s going to drive us home now?*