

SHOULD HAVE, WOULD HAVE, AND COULD HAVE

UNIT 11, LESSON A

Should have, could have, and would have are sometimes called “modals of lost opportunity” because they describe situations when we are imagining that the past was different.

Before we study those terms in the past, let’s review the difference between **should**, **could**, and **would**. The general rule is:

- **Should** for recommendation / advice

*If you want to lose weight, you **should** eat healthy food.*

- **Could** for possibilities

I have the day off tomorrow.

*Great! We could spend the day at the beach. Or we **could** go shopping.*

- **Would** for imagining results

*If I were rich, I **would** buy a boat.*

The same general rule applies when using **should have**, **could have**, and **would have** for imaginary past situations.

Should Have

Use **should have** to say that a different action was **recommended** in the past.

If you arrive late to English class, you can say:

- “I **should have** left my house earlier.”  **advice for the past**

If you tell something terrible and later you **regret an argument** (apologize), you can say:

- “I **shouldn’t have** yelled at you yesterday. I’m sorry.”

You can also use **should have** / **shouldn’t have** to tell other people that a different **action in the past would have been better**. If your son fails a test, you can say:

- “You **should have** studied. You **shouldn’t have** played video games all weekend.”

Could Have

Use **could have** to talk about **possibilities and abilities** we had to do in the past, but we didn't do it.

For example, someone who didn't go to college can say:

- “If I had gone to college, I could have gotten a better job.”

When talking about a gymnast who didn't win a competition, you can say:

- “She could have won the gold medal if she hadn't fallen three times.”

Could have is often used as a conditional with “**if + had + past participle**” (If I had gone / if she hadn't fallen) – these “if” phrases express the imaginary past situation. However, in some cases you can use could have without the “if” phrase. Imagine you're driving with a person who makes a dangerous maneuver on the road. You can say:

- “Are you crazy? We could have gotten into an accident.”

Would Have

Use **would have** to imagine a result (we mainly use would have in the third conditional):

1. If you arrive late at the airport and miss your flight, you can say:

- “If we had arrived earlier, we would have caught our flight.”

2. If you forget your umbrella, and it starts to rain, and you get wet, you can say:

- “If I had brought my umbrella, I wouldn’t have gotten wet in the rain.”

Would have expresses more certainty about the result than could have:

a) “If I had worked harder, I could have gotten a promotion.”

(maybe I’d get a promotion... but maybe not)

On a test where you need 70% to pass:

b) “I got a 68 on the test. If I had gotten two more points, I would have passed.”

(with the two points, passing the test is CERTAIN)

CONTRACTIONS

Should have gets contracted to **should've** and **shoulda**.

I shoulda been there.

The 'a' at the end is a reduction of 'have'.

Could have gets contracted to **could've** and **coulda**.

You coulda been hurt!

Would have gets contracted to **would've** and **woulda**.

I woulda thought so.

GRAMMAR PRACTICE 1.

1. Which modal is used to for the best or right thing to do?

- could
- would
- should

2. Which modal combination is used for lost possibility?

- could have
- would have
- should have

3. Which modal is related to the imaginary and means "I could imagine doing something"?

- could
- would
- should

4. Mr. E, you ___ studied for your exam instead of going out drinking with Peter. Now you will fail.

- could have
- would have
- should have

5. Mr. E said he ____ come to visit you if he had known that you were in the hospital.

- could have
- would have
- should have

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GRAMMAR PRACTICE 2.

1. I _____ (buy) bread but I didn't know we needed it. (past possibility)

2. We _____ (invite) so many people to our party!

3. I _____ (start) saving money years ago! (past advice / regret)

4. We _____ (join) you at the restaurant, but we couldn't get a babysitter. (past willingness)

5. The weather _____ (be) any worse! (past negative possibility)

6. I _____ (arrive) on time, even if I'd left earlier. There were dreadful traffic jams all the way. (past negative possibility)

7. They _____ (win) the football match, but John hurt his ankle. (past possibility)

GRAMMAR PRACTICE 2: ANSWERS

1. I **could have bought** bread but I didn't know we needed it. (past possibility)
2. We **shouldn't have invited** so many people to our party (past negative advice)
3. I **shouldn't have started** saving money years ago! (past advice / regret)
4. We **would have joined** you at the restaurant, but we couldn't get a babysitter. (past willingness)
5. The weather **couldn't have been** any worse! (past negative possibility)
6. I **couldn't have arrived** on time, even if I'd left earlier. There were dreadful traffic jams all the way. (past negative possibility)
7. They **could have won** the football match, but John hurt his ankle. (past possibility)