

MODAL VERB “COULD”

Could can be used as: 1) possibility, 2) ability in the past, 3) polite request, 4) as a conditional statement and 5) as a soft suggestion.

COULD AS A POSSIBILITY

When we want to express a possibility that is about 50% we can also use the modal verb “could”.

Examples:

She **could** be at home, she said she might take the day off.

They **could** win the game, they seem to ready for it.

It's very bright this morning, it **could** be a nice day later on.

There **could** be some oil in that area, geologically there is potential.

She **could** marry him, after all he has a lot of money.

In each of the above examples there is a possibility for each of the situations to be true, but they

are not certain to be true. Each statement is about a 50% possibility. This differs from the modal verb “should” which is a stronger possibility than “could” because the speaker has a stronger reason or more evidence in believing what they are saying. Compare the following examples:

It **could** rain today, It hasn't rained for a while.

It **should** rain today, the clouds are very dark and heavy.

In the first statement the speaker is only guessing without a real strong reason. In the second statement the speaker has more evidence because he/she can see that the conditions for rain are present.

She **could** be at the party, she said she might go.

She **should** be at the party, she said she was going to go.

In the third statement the speaker is not sure because they use another modal, “might” which

indicates a possibility, but not a strong possibility. In the fourth statement the speaker is more certain that she is “at the party” because she told the speaker directly that “she was going to go to the party”.

They **could** be finished with their homework by now.

They **should** be finished with their homework by now.

Even though both statements five and six are the same, the speaker in statement six is more confident that they are finished with their homework even though no reason was given. The use of the modal “should” tells the listener the speaker is more certain.

Here are examples with the modal “**could**” as a 50% possibility.

You know, they **could** be at their friends’ house, they said they might go there.
I don’t know, I **could** pass the test but it is going to be difficult.
She **could** love me, she always looks at me with bright eyes and a smile.
The aliens **could** land here, they have the capability.

Note: The negative of “could” as a possibility is couldn’t but it is much stronger in the negative form than in the affirmative form.

Examples:

It **couldn’t** be them already, they just left ten minutes ago.
There **couldn’t** be oil in this area because it’s not geologically possible.
She **couldn’t** love me, she’s been going out with that idiot Jose Gonzales!
The aliens **couldn’t** possibly land here, they can’t even drive cars!

In the above examples the speaker is very certain in each of the situations.
The speaker has strong reasons for making each of the negative statements or they feel very strongly in what they are saying.

COULD AS ABILITY IN THE PAST

When we want to express someone’s ability in the past that no longer exists now we use “could”.

Examples:

When I was fifteen years old I **could** easily swim two miles without stopping.
He **could** score one goal each game, but since his injury he had to quit playing soccer.
I **could** dance all night at the discos and still get up for class when I was twenty, but now that I am thirty I go to bed at 10:00 pm.
She **could** sing beautifully when she was single, but she lost her voice when she got married.
He **could** go out with any girl he wanted to when he was twenty, but now that he is old, bald and fat he has to beg girls to go out with him.

In each of the above examples there was some ability in the past that no longer exists now.
The negative of “could” as a past ability is “couldn’t”.

Examples:

He **couldn’t** swim well when he was young, now he is in the Olympics competing for a gold medal in every swimming event!
Thalia **couldn’t** sing well when she was a child but now she is one of the most popular Latin singers in the world!
My sister **couldn’t** do math in elementary school but now she is as good as Einstein was!

My wife **couldn’t** cook when we were dating, but since we’ve been married I’ve taught her everything she knows about cooking!

I **couldn't speak** English before I took this course, but now I can speak better English than the teacher!

The structure for “could” as a possibility and “could” as ability in the past is the same. We only change the complement.

SUBJECT	+ COULD	+ VERB IN INFINITIVE FORM	+ COMPLEMENTIZER
I	could	play	golf when I was young.
You	could	paint	that later.
He	could	tell	the police.
She	could	be	at the park.
It	could	win	the race.
We	could	go	to my sister's house.
They	could	leave	tomorrow.

COULD AS A POLITE REQUEST

“**Could**” can also be used as a polite request or request for permission but more informally than “**May I**”. The most common usage of “could” as a polite request or request for permission is with the pronouns “I” and “you”.

Examples:

Could I use your phone for a second?

Mommy, **could** I go outside to play?

Sir, **could** I see your driver's license, registration and proof of insurance, please?

Could you please be quiet for a second, I am trying to talk to this beautiful girl.

Bill **could** you please get me a glass of water. I think I am going to faint.

Could I have eight hamburgers. Three colas and three orders of fries, please? **Could**

he please be excused from class tomorrow, his sister is getting married. **Could** she

live with us for a while, she is still in shock because her husband left her. Do you

think they **could** borrow \$ 5,000 from us honey?

Could you please pass me my pen. It is under your desk.

The structure for “could” as a polite request is as follows:

COULD	+ SUBJECT	+ VERB IN INFINITIVE FORM	+ COMPLEMENTIZER
Could	I (please)	have	your number?
Could	You	pass	the butter (please)?
Could	he (please)	come	to our house?
Could	she (please)	spend	the night?
Could	we	go	outside (please)?
Could	they	leave	work early (please)?

Note: “Please” is optional after the pronoun or the entire request. It is not necessary but it makes the request more polite and formal. It is suggested that you use “please” whenever making a request.

COULD FOR CONDITIONAL STATEMENTS

When we want to express a situation that is not likely to happen at the present moment, because it depends on other events to take place, we call these situations conditionals. We often use the modals “**could**” and “**would**” to express these situations that at the present time are not likely to happen. We also have to include the word “**if**” when we make conditional statements.

The structure is as follows:

SUBJECT + COULD + VERB IN INFINITIVE FORM + IF + SUBJECT + VERB IN SIMPLE PAST + COMPLEMENT

Examples:

I **could** pass the exam **if** I studied hard for it.

You **could** go dancing tonight **if** you felt better.

She **could** win the lottery **if** she bought a ticket.

If she got a scholarship, she **could** afford to go to college.

If they practiced enough, they **could** win the baseball tournament.

If we left early enough we **could** make it on time.

Note: It doesn't matter if the “if clause” is at the beginning or in the second part of the statement.

In the first example the speaker has the possibility to pass the exam, but he / she must study hard for it.

In the second example, the speaker tells the listener that it's possible for him to go dancing but the condition is that he / she must feel better.

In the third example, the speaker is saying that “she” has the possibility to win the lottery, but the condition is that she must buy a lottery ticket.

In the last three examples above the statement begins with the “if” clause and the result clause follows with no change in meaning.

Here are more examples of conditional statements using “could”:

If I had enough money, I **could** buy a new car.

I **could** buy a new car **if** I had enough money.

I **could** go to the moon **if** I were an astronaut.

If I were an astronaut, I **could** go to the moon.

She **could** win a beauty contest **if** she lost some weight.

If she lost some weight, she **could** win a beauty contest.

Note: It is also important to note that when using the verb “to be” in conditional statements all persons are conjugated in the “**were**” form.

Examples:

I could buy a big house if I **were** rich.

He could win the race if he **were** a little faster.

I could go to the discos if I **were** older but I am only twelve.

If she **were** smarter, she could get rid of that guy.
If I **were** at the party now I could be dancing with her.

It is also possible to make negative conditional statements but we must use: couldn't, didn't and weren't.

Examples:

If I **didn't** study English, I **couldn't** go to Australia.
If he didn't have the money, he **couldn't** buy that car.
If she **weren't** trained for the job, she **couldn't** do the work.
They **couldn't** pass the exam if they **didn't** study.
If I **didn't** work, I **couldn't** get money.

COULD AS A SOFT SUGGESTION

When we want to make a suggestion not quite as strong as "should", we sometimes use the modal verb "could" which is similar to using "might" as a soft suggestion.

Examples:

You **could** study a little harder.
The students **could** show more respect towards their teachers.
Margaret **could** tell her husband she loves him once in awhile.
We **could** take more trips out of the city more often.
You **could** come home earlier you know.



Read the sentences carefully and determine if the modal verb **could** is being used to show ability in the past, possibility, or to make a polite request.

1. I could run 5 miles in 30 minutes when I was 18 years old.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
2. Could you pass me the salt, please?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
3. Hurry up! They could come at any minute.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
4. Excuse me, Could you tell me the shortest way to the airport?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
5. I couldn't come to the meeting because I was really busy.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
6. I could speak some Spanish when I was a kid.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
7. Could I borrow your scissors for a minute?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
8. We could go to a restaurant after the movie.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
9. I could play the piano when I was in middle school.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
10. Could you answer the phone, please?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
11. Excuse me, could you tell me where Mr. Smith's office is?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request

12. Could you please answer my questions?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
13. If it doesn't rain tomorrow, we could go to the beach.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
14. Could you let Mr. Smith know that I am waiting for him? Thanks.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
15. When I worked as a secretary, I could type very fast. Now I am a little rusty.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
16. Could you sign here, please?
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
17. Gary couldn't study because his roommate was having a party.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
18. Could you please be quiet? I am trying to watch a movie.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
19. If the store is closed, we could go to the park.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request
20. When I was 16 years old, I could dance like a professional ballet dancer.
a. ability in the past b. possibility c. polite request