

# How to use could and couldn't in English sentences

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*Could* is the preterite of can. It expresses a capacity in the past. *Couldn't* express a disability in the past, or something hypothetical.

## COULD

Could can express a capacity or permission in the past (it is used as the past of can):

- I could smell something burning.
- My grandmother could speak six languages.
- I was totally free. I could go where I wanted.

Compare the following sentences:

- I can see something. (*present*)
- I could see something. (*past*)

Could could mean a hypothetical ability, i.e. something could be realized or be true now or in the future (it's similar to *might* or *may*):

- You could succeed if you worked harder.
- I could go out with you but I'm tired.
- They could arrive anytime now.
- Could you do this exercise in one minute?
- If we had some eggs I could make you some pancakes.

We can use could to make a suggestion or talk about possible actions (we can then replace it with can):

- We could go to the movies tonight if you want.
- When you go to London next week, you could stay at Paul's place.
- He could try to fix the car himself.

Could also express a logical deduction:

- It could be true.
- She could still be in bed.
- It could freeze tonight.
- Where's Paul? He could be at Tony's place.

*Could have* + *past participle* is used to express a possibility in the past, but that has not happened (to make a criticism, or to express a hypothesis, for example):

- You could have broken your arm.
- He could have tried once more.
- Your brother could have helped you.
- We were lucky: we could have run out of petrol.

*Could* also express unrealistic things:

- This place is amazing. I could stay here for ever.

*Could* allows you to ask for permission or something politely, in the present:

- Could I please use your bathroom?
- Could we move on to the next topic now please?
- Could you pass me the salt please?
- I'm busy right now. Could you call back later?

## COULDN'T

*Couldn't* allows to express a disability in the past:

- I was so tired I couldn't get up.
- I couldn't start my car this morning.

This incapacity could be due to something that was not permitted or authorized:

- In high school, we couldn't use our smartphones.
- Tina couldn't go to the party because his parents wouldn't let her.

With *couldn't*, we doubt that anything is true, we are almost sure of what we are saying:

- It couldn't be true.
- Paul couldn't be at Tony's place.
- You couldn't be hungry. You've just had some pizza.

To express the impossibility of the past, we use *couldn't have + past participle*:

- We had a really good evening. It couldn't have been better.
- Tina couldn't have gone to the party because she was sick.