

Could (do) and could have (done)

A We use **could** in a number of ways. 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 only used in this way. We also use **could** to talk about 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**.

What shall we
do tonight?

We **could** go to the cinema.



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

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 (a situation or a happening) is possible now or in the future. The meaning is similar to **might** or **may** (see Unit 29):

- ☐ 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. (*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 when you were in Paris? You **could have** stayed with Sarah. (you didn't stay with her)
- ☐ David was lucky. He **could have** hurt himself when he fell, but he's OK.

E We use **couldn't** to say that something 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** (done):

- ☐ We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have** been better.
- ☐ The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have** gone anyway because he was ill. (= it would not have been possible for him to go)

Exercises

27.1 Answer the questions with a suggestion. Use **could**.

- 1 Where shall we go for our holidays?
- 2 What shall we have for dinner tonight?
- 3 When shall I phone Vicky?
- 4 What shall I give Ann for her birthday?
- 5 Where shall we hang this picture?

(to Scotland) We could go to Scotland.
 (fish) We
 (now) You
 (a book)
 (in the kitchen)

27.2 In some of these sentences, you need **could** (not **can**). Change the sentences where necessary.

- 1 The story can be true, but I don't think it is. could be true
- 2 It's a nice day. We can go for a walk. OK (could go is also possible)
- 3 I'm so angry with him. I can kill him!
- 4 If you're hungry, we can have dinner now.
- 5 It's so nice here. I can stay here all day, but unfortunately I have to go.
- 6 A: Where's my bag. Have you seen it?
 B: No, but it can be in the car.
- 7 Peter is a keen musician. He plays the flute and he can also play the piano.
- 8 A: I need to borrow a camera.
 B: You can borrow mine.
- 9 Be careful climbing that tree. You can fall.

27.3 Complete the sentences. Use **could** or **could have** + a suitable verb.

- 1 A: What shall we do this evening?
 B: I don't mind. We could go to the cinema.
- 2 A: I spent a very boring evening at home yesterday.
 B: Why did you stay at home? You out with us.
- 3 A: Have you seen this job advertised in the paper? You for it.
 B: What sort of job? Show me the advertisement.
- 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 last night.
 B: Why did you walk? You a taxi.
- 6 A: Where shall we meet tomorrow?
 B: Well, I to your house if you like.

27.4 Complete the sentences. Use **couldn't** or **couldn't have** + these verbs (in the correct form):

~~be~~ be come find get ~~live~~ 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. I'd look silly and people would laugh at me.
- 4 We managed to find the restaurant you recommended, but we it without the map that you drew for us.
- 5 Paul has to get up at 4 o'clock every morning. I don't know how he does it. I up at that time every day.
- 6 The staff at the hotel were really nice when we stayed there last summer. They more helpful.
- 7 A: I tried to phone you last week. We had a party and I wanted to invite you.
 B: That was nice of you, but I anyway. I was away all last week.