

Past modals of deduction: must have, might have, can't have

CEFR B1-B2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Must have shows certainty, might have shows possibility and can't have shows impossibility about the past. All three take have plus the past participle.

The rule

The three levels of certainty

- Must have is almost certain: "She must have missed the bus."
- Might have, may have and could have are possible: "He might have forgotten."
- Can't have and couldn't have are impossible: "They can't have arrived yet."
- Choose the level of certainty first, then add the evidence.

The form: modal plus have plus past participle

- Every past deduction uses have plus the past participle: must have seen, might have gone.
- Have never changes: "She must have known", not "she must has known".
- The negative of must have is can't have, not mustn't have.
- Spoken English often shortens have: "must've", "might've".

Must have and can't have

- Must have draws a confident conclusion: "The lights are off; they must have gone out."
- Can't have rejects a conclusion: "He can't have finished already."
- The evidence usually appears in a second clause or the sentence before.
- Use must have only when the evidence is strong.

Might have, may have and could have

- These three are close in meaning: "She might have taken the early train."
- Could have can also criticise an unused opportunity: "You could have told me."
- Might not have and may not have mean possibly not: "He might not have seen the message."
- Can't have is stronger than might not have, because it rules the action out.

Common confusions

- Do not confuse must have with had to: "I had to leave" is an obligation, not a deduction.
- Do not use mustn't have for a past deduction: "He mustn't have seen it" is wrong.
- Should have is criticism, not deduction: "You should have called."

- Would have is unreal: "I would have helped if you had asked."

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. She is not here. She ___ missed the bus.

2. He ___ forgotten our appointment; he is usually on time.

3. They ___ arrived yet; it is too early.

4. You ___ told me the truth instead of hiding it.

5. The lights are off, so they ___ gone out.

6. She ___ taken the wrong train; I am not sure yet.

7. He ___ seen your message; it went to spam.

8. We ___ won the game, but our best player was injured.

9. I ___ left my keys at home; they are not in my bag.

10. It ___ been easy for them to move abroad.

11. The ground is wet. It ___ rained during the night.

12. She ___ heard the news; nobody told her.

13. You ___ asked me; I would have helped.

14. He ___ taken the money; he was not in the office.

15. I think she ___ missed the train.

16. They ___ finished already; the race only started ten minutes ago.

17. He looks tired. He ___ slept badly.

18. We ___ bought a bigger house, but we did not have enough money.

19. She ___ forgotten to lock the door; the door is open.

20. He ___ gone home already; his coat is still here.

Answer key

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1. **must have** — A confident past deduction takes must have plus the past participle missed.
2. **might have** — A possible past explanation takes might have plus the past participle forgotten.
3. **can't have** — An impossible past conclusion takes can't have plus the past participle arrived.
4. **could have** — Could have points at an opportunity that was missed in the past.
5. **must have** — The evidence supports a confident past deduction with must have gone.
6. **may have** — May have keeps the past possibility open, matching the speaker's uncertainty.
7. **might not have** — A possible negative past explanation takes might not have seen.
8. **could have** — Could have describes a past possibility that did not happen.
9. **must have** — The missing keys lead to a confident deduction with must have left.
10. **can't have** — The negative past deduction takes can't have plus the participle been.
11. **must have** — The wet ground is strong evidence, so must have rained is the deduction.
12. **can't have** — Nobody telling her makes the hearing impossible, so can't have heard fits.
13. **could have** — Could have points at the missed opportunity to ask.
14. **can't have** — The alibi makes the action impossible, so can't have taken is the deduction.
15. **might have** — Might have expresses a possible past explanation for her absence.
16. **can't have** — The short time makes finishing impossible, so can't have finished is correct.
17. **must have** — His tired face is the evidence for a confident deduction with must have slept.
18. **could have** — Could have describes the past possibility that money prevented.
19. **must have** — The open door is the evidence for must have forgotten.
20. **can't have** — The coat makes the action impossible, so can't have gone is the deduction.