English Grammar: Modal Verbs in the Past

The only modal verb that can be conjugated in the “Past Simple” is “can”. The others use the “Present Perfect” form:

Present	**Past**	
can	could	(+ bare infinitive)
might	might have	(+ past participle)
must	must have	(+ past participle)
could	could have	(+ past participle)
should	should have	(+ past participle)
would	would have	(+ past participle)

1. Ability: can → could / can’t → couldn’t

Examples:

- Present: I **can** play football well.
  Past: When I was young, I **could** run, but I **couldn’t** play football well.
- Present: He **can’t** run fast.
  Past: When he was young, he **could** run fast.
- Present: She **can** speak six languages.
  Past: When she was young, she **couldn’t** even speak one language!

Exercise: Create sentences in the past tense using ***could*** or ***couldn’t***.

1. Peter – when young – sing very well

_____

2. My father – when young – (not) get a job

_____

2. A possible past: "might have" + past participle

Examples:

- A: Where is John? B: I don’t know. He **might have gone** out.
- We have no power. The power company **might have cut** our power.
- I **might have left** the keys on the table, I’m not sure.

Exercise:

Complete the following sentences using ***might have*** and the given verbs:

1. I _____ _____ _____ a copy of the file, but I don’t remember. *(make)*

2. James _____ _____ _____ to the mall, but I’m not sure. *(go)*

3. She _____ _____ _____ me, but I can’t see the payment. *(pay)*

3. A probable past: "must have" + past participle

Examples:

- You **must have seen** it. (…. because it is a very famous film.)
- He **must have gone** out. (…. because he is not here.)
- We **must have missed** the bus. (…. because we are ten minutes late.)
- I **must have forgotten** to pay the electricity bill. (…. because we have no power.)

Exercise. Complete the following sentences using ***must have*** and the given verbs:

1. I lent him a million dollars! I _____ _____ _____ crazy! *(be)*

2. We _____ _____ _____ in a circle, because I recognize this place. *(drive)*

3. They _____ _____ _____ already. They left two hours ago. *(arrive)*

4. She _____ _____ _____ her test yesterday, because she's very upset. *(fail)*

5. Tom _____ _____ _____ this film a thousand times! He loves it! *(see)*

6. The power company _____ _____ _____ our power! I think that I forgot to pay the electricity bill! *(cut)*

4. An alternative past: "could(n't) have" + past participle

Examples:

- I **could have gone** to the party. (I was free, but I didn't know about the party.)
- You **could have come** with me. (I didn't know you were free.)
- He **could have paid** less. (He didn't ask for a discount.)
- I **couldn't have avoided** the accident. (The brakes failed.)

Exercise:

Complete the following sentences using ***could have*** *or* ***couldn't have*** and the given verbs:

1. Why didn't you tell me that you went to the cinema yesterday? I _____ _____ _____ with you guys! I was bored at home! *(go)*

2. The food was delicious, but I _____ _____ _____ another thing – I was so full! *(eat)*

3. *(In a favela in Rio)* "I _____ _____ _____ killed! That bullet almost hit me!" *(be)*

4. A fantastic result! You _____ _____ _____ better! You got 100%! *(do)*

5. They _____ _____ _____ by car, but they came by taxi, because they want to drink beer! *(come)*

6. When I was young, I _____ _____ _____ around the world, but I chose to work instead. I regret it now. *(travel)*

5. Advice & Regret: "should(n't) have" + past participle

Late advice/Recommendation (you, he, she, they)

- He **should have finished** the test. (He didn't finish, and he didn't pass.)
- You **should have gone** to the doctor. (You didn't go, and now you are worse.)
- They **should have taken** a taxi. (They went by car, and parking was difficult.)
- She **shouldn't have smoked** so much. (Now she has lung cancer.)

Regret (I, we)

- We **should have paid** more attention. (We didn't pay attention, now we're lost.)
- I **shouldn't have shouted** at her. (I shouted at her, and now she is crying.)
- He **shouldn't have tried** drugs. (He tried drugs, and now he's addicted.)

Exercise:
Complete the following sentences using ***should have*** or ***shouldn't have*** and the given verbs:

1. I _____ _____ _____ a copy of the file. My PC broke, and now I need the file. *(make)*
2. You _____ _____ _____ carefully to the teacher! *(listen)*
3. He is innocent, but he _____ _____ _____ Now the police think that he is guilty. *(run)*
4. What a hangover! I _____ _____ _____ so much. I'll never drink so much again! *(drink)*
5. They _____ _____ _____ earlier. The film has already started. *(arrive)*
6. We _____ _____ _____ more food on Saturday. Now we have nothing to eat. *(buy)*

Songs of "regret":

The Beatles – I Should Have Known Better
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maMecxn1JSQ (3 mins)

Elvis Presley – You are Always on my Mind
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4lVk_vtZ-8 (4 mins)

Bon Jovi - This ain't a Love Song
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsPv3EwkEgE (5 mins)

6. Hypothetical/Intended past: "would(n't) have" + past participle

Examples:

- I **would have finished** the test, but I got sick after an hour.
- He **would have come** yesterday, but his car broke down on the way.
- I **wouldn't have missed** this class for anything! I LOVE this subject!

Third conditional examples:

- We **wouldn't have known** about it if you hadn't told us.
- He **would have seen** the other driver if he had used his lights.
- I **wouldn't have bought** tickets if I'd known that he was such a bad singer.

Exercise:
Complete the following sentences using ***would have*** or ***wouldn't have*** and the given verbs:

1. I _____ _____ _____ a copy of the file, but I forgot. I'm sorry! *(make)*

2. He _____ _____ _____ the position if the salary wasn't so low. *(accept)*

3. We _____ _____ _____ a tip if the food wasn't so awful. *(give)*

4. She _____ _____ _____ her homework if I hadn't reminded her. *(do)*

5. The dog _____ _____ _____ with us too, but he is very sick. *(come)*

6. John _____ _____ _____ extremely irritated if I had used his car! *(be)*

Suggested videos:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQpM0NVM0CM (14 mins, English)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COXT0Dw36yc (13 mins, Portuguese)