**Source:**

[**https://www.espressoenglish.net/past-modals-should-have-could-have-would-have/**](https://www.espressoenglish.net/past-modals-should-have-could-have-would-have/)

**Past Modals: Should Have, Could Have, Would Have**

“Past modals” or “modals of lost opportunity” are used to imagine that the past was different.

Should have, could have, and would have are sometimes called “modals of lost opportunity” because they describe situations when we are imagining that the past was different.

Before we study those terms in the past, let’s review the difference between **should, could,**and **would.**The general rule is:

* **Should** for recommendation / advice  
  *“If you want to lose weight, you should eat healthy food.”*
* **Could** for possibilities  
  *“I have the day off tomorrow.”*  
  *“Great! We could spend the day at the beach. Or we could go shopping.”*
* **Would** for imagining results  
  *“If I were rich, I would buy a boat.”*

[Click here for more examples of the difference between should, could, and would.](https://www.espressoenglish.net/difference-between-should-could-and-would/)

The same general rule applies when using should have, could have, and would have for imaginary past situations.

**Should Have**

Use should have to say that a different action was recommended in the past.

If you arrive late to English class, you can say:

“I **should have** left my house earlier.”

If you regret an argument, you can say:

“I **shouldn’t have** yelled at you yesterday. I’m sorry.”

You can also use should have / shouldn’t have to tell other people that a different action in the past would have been better. If your son fails a test, you can say:

“You **should have** studied. You **shouldn’t have** played video games all weekend.”

**Could Have**

Use could have to talk about possibilities if something had been different in the past.

For example, someone who didn’t go to college can say:

“If I had gone to college, I **could have** gotten a better job.”

When talking about a gymnast who didn’t win a competition, you can say:

“She **could have** won the gold medal if she hadn’t fallen three times.”

Could have is often used with “if + had + past participle” (If I had gone / if she hadn’t fallen) – these “if” phrases express the imaginary past situation. However, in some cases you can use could have without the “if” phrase. Imagine you’re driving with a person who makes a dangerous maneuver on the road. You can say:

“Are you crazy? We **could have** gotten into an accident.”

**Would Have**

Use would have to imagine a *result* (if something had been different in the past):

If you arrive late at the airport and miss your flight, you can say:

“If we had arrived earlier, we **would have** caught our flight.”

If you forget your umbrella, and it starts to rain, and you get wet, you can say:

“If I had brought my umbrella, I **wouldn’t have** gotten wet in the rain.”

**Would have** expresses more certainty about the result than **could have:**

“If I had worked harder, I **could have** gotten a promotion.”  
*(maybe I’d get a promotion… but maybe not)*

On a test where you need 70% to pass:  
“I got a 68 on the test. If I had gotten two more points, I **would have** passed.”  
*(with the two points, passing the test is CERTAIN)*

**Spoken English**

In spoken English, many people say **should’ve, could’ve,**and **would’ve.**