

Explanations

Had to and must have

Had to is the past form of *must* and refers to a past obligation.

*Sorry I'm late, I **had to post** some letters.*

The negative form is *didn't have to* and refers to an absence of obligation.

Must have refers to past certainty, (see below)

Should have and ought to have

Where **should* appears, *ought to* is also possible.

- Expectation

Should have refers to something which was supposed to happen.

*The parcel I sent you ***should have arrived** by now.*

- Criticism of an action

*You ***shouldn't have eaten** so much last night.*

- *Should have* and verbs of thinking

The past form *knew* in the example is an unreal verb form, and the *should have* form is used according to 'sequence of verb forms'. See Grammar 9.

*I **should have thought** you knew.*

- With *be* and adjectives describing chance

*It was strange that you **should have been staying** in the same hotel last year.*

- As a polite expression of thanks on receiving a gift or a favour

*I've done the washing up for you. - Oh, you really **shouldn't have!***

The intonation should be friendly, as this is not a criticism.

Could have

- *Could have* refers to past possibility or uncertainty.

*David **could have won** the race if he had tried, (possibility/ability)*

*It **could have been** Sue, I suppose, (uncertainty)*

- *Couldn't have* is also possible for both meanings.

- *Couldn't have* can be used with comparative adjectives.

*We **couldn't have been happier** in those days.*

- *Could have* can also express unwillingness.

*She **could have gone** to the party with her friends, (but she didn't)*

*We **couldn't have left** the dog on its own. (so we didn't)*

Could

- *Could* refers to past permission or past ability.

*When I was sixteen I **could stay** out till 11.00. (I was allowed to)*

*Mary **could swim** when she was three, (she actually did)*

- Compare:

*Mary **could have swum** when she was three, (but she didn't)*

**May have and
might have**

- *Might have* refers to past possibility which did not happen.
*You **might have drowned!***
- *Might have* and *may have* refer to uncertainty.
*I suppose I **may have been** rather critical.*
- Both can be used in the negative to express uncertainty.
*They **might not have received** our letter yet.*
- *Might have* is used to express annoyance at someone's failure to do something. There is strong stress on the words underlined.
*You **might have told** me my trousers were split!*
- *I might have known* + *would* is an idiom by which the speaker expresses ironically that an action was typical of someone else.
*I **might have known** that he **would** be late.*
A: *It was Jack who broke the vase.* B: *I **might have known!***

**Must have and
can't have**

- These refer to the speaker's certainty about a past action.
*Someone **must have taken** it. (I am sure they did)*
*You **can't have lost** it. (I am sure you didn't)*
- Both can also be used with *surely* in exclamations.
Surely you can't have eaten all of it!
Surely you must have noticed it!

Would not

- This expresses an unwillingness in the past.
*Everyone was angry because Sam **wouldn't turn** off the television.*

Would have

- *Would have* can refer to events in the past which did not actually happen.
*I **would have accepted** this job, but I didn't want to move house.*
- Assumptions about the past are also possible with *would have*.
A: *Someone called after you left but didn't leave a message.*
B: *That **would have been** Cathy, probably.*

**Needn't have and
didn't need to**

- Needn't have done* refers to an unnecessary action which was actually done.
*You **needn't have paid** all at once, (you did pay)*
Didn't need to refers to an unnecessary action which was not done.
*I **didn't need to go** to the dentist again, luckily.*

**Adverbs and
modals**

- Adverbs such as *well, easily, obviously, really, just* are often used to emphasise modal expressions, in both present and past time.
- You could **easily** have been killed.*
*I might **well** decide to come.*
*She **obviously** must have left.*
*You couldn't **really** have managed without me.*
I might just take you up on that.