

Past Modals: Would've, Could've, Should've



1. Read the story and answer the questions about the underlined phrases below.

Andy woke up in the darkness with a jump, a horrible grinding sound coming from the side of the boat. He jumped out of bed and ran towards the steering room, the whole yacht was shaking as it continued to grind against something in the water. "I should have stayed awake instead of letting those two steer the ship" he thought, kicking himself for leaving his sons in charge. He burst into the steering room to find both his sons, Caleb and Jared, staring at him wide-eyed with panic. The grinding sound finally stopped.

"What happened??" Andy yelled.

"We don't know!" Caleb yelled back, clearly panicked "there are some coral reefs around here on the radar but we thought we could steer through it!"

"You should have woken me up!" Andy said, furiously grabbing the steering wheel and bringing the boat to a stop.

"We would have done that, but you said only to wake you in an emergency." Jared said.

"And you don't think this counts as an emergency?" Andy asked, checking the ships sensors for any damage.

"We thought you'd be angry if we woke you up!" Caleb said.

"I wouldn't have been angry, why would I be angry??" Andy snapped angrily.

"You're always grumpy when we wake you up" Caleb mumbled, and his father stared at him for a long time. "Ok..." Caleb said, hanging his head "I shouldn't have said that"

"Go and check all the rooms and make sure there aren't any leaks or damage to the hull." Andy said coldly, and Caleb ran off to check the boat. An awkward silence fell between Andy and Jared.

"Ok. In hindsight we should have woken you up." Jared said, looking ashamed "But everything is fine. I don't see why you have to get so mad."

Andy sighed, looking out into the night. "Because this could have been so much worse Jared. We're miles away from land. We could have died" He looked at his son repeating himself more calmly "You should have woken me."

Jared shrugged angrily "We could have handled it ourselves, we don't need your help" he said.



A coral reef

- What structure is used to talk about mistakes in the past?
- What structure is used to talk about possibilities or options in the past?
- What structure is used to say something would *definitely* have been different?

Past modals such as “would have”, “should have”, and “could have” are used to express ideas about the past. The structure is *would have / should have / could have + past participle*.

The negative structure is *would not have / should not have / could not have + past participle*.

“Should have” expresses that an action made in the past was a mistake.

Eg. “I’m so tired. I should have gone to bed earlier.”

“Could have” expresses a possibility or option in the past that no longer exists now.

Eg. “I could have studied medicine, but I chose music instead.”

“Would have” expresses that something in the past would *definitely* be different if other circumstances had been different.

Eg. “I would have told you if you had asked, but you didn’t.”



2. Complete the sentences with “would have”, “could have” or “should have” and the past participle of the verb in brackets. Some sentences may have more than one answer.

- a) I’m so cold. I (wear) a jacket.
- b) If you didn’t live so far away I (go) to your party.
- c) I’m sorry I missed your game. I (be) there.
- d) My stomach hurts. I (negative/eat) so much!
- e) I’m sorry, I (give) you the promotion, but my boss told me to give it to Jasmine instead.
- f) Do you think I (buy) my wife flowers for our anniversary?
- g) Why didn’t you tell me about this? If I had known I (help) you with it.
- h) I had a crash because of the icy roads. I (change) my tires to winter tires.
- i) If I had known my ex was here, I (negative/come).
- j) If I had known the restaurant had such a bad reputation I (negative/eat) there!
- k) The weather was perfect! It (negative/be) better!



3. A friend comes to you with the following problems. Tell them what they *should have done* to avoid these problems.

a) I got pulled over for speeding, and now I have to pay a \$100 fine!

E.g. "You should have driven slower. You could have lost your license!"

b) I have a test in 15 minutes, and I haven't even studied!

c) My boss is angry because I forgot to tell him about the meeting today.

d) I lost my deposit on my apartment because it was still dirty when I moved out.

e) My birthday party is a disaster! Everyone is starving and there are only a few snacks.

f) My girlfriend is angry because I bought her a dog without asking first.

g) I lied on my C.V and said I could speak Spanish, and now my boss wants me to attend a business meeting in Spanish!

h) I left my bike unlocked and somebody stole it!



4. Pairwork: Think about a mistake you or someone else has made. Describe the situation to your partner, and then tell them what you *should have done* or *should not have done*. Use the space below for notes.



5. The Darwin Awards are an informal “award” given to people who have died in a particularly stupid manner. Read through the following Darwin Awards and make sentences with past modals about what you have read.

1. In 2001 a man named Marco was driving a truck with 3 of his friends in the back seat. Marco noticed the brakes of the truck were not working. In a split-second Marco jumped out of the speeding truck, without telling any of his friends about the problem. Luckily Marco's friends were able to slow the speeding truck to a safe stop. Unfortunately, the jump from the truck killed Marco.

E.g. He really should have told his friends before jumping out.

2. In 1982 a few friends decided to go out into the Arizona desert and shoot cactuses. But not just any cactuses, they were shooting a large and rare type of cactus that can grow to be over 12 meters tall (damaging these plants is strictly against the law). One of the men stood beneath a cactus and shot one of the branches several times. Apparently his last word was “timber” before a 7 meter cactus branch fell on him, killing him immediately.

3. In 1993 an office worker called Gary was giving a tour of the skyscraper he worked in to some law students. Gary decided to demonstrate the strength of the windows in the building by running into them with his shoulder. Gary went straight through the window and fell 24 floors to his death.

4. In 1997 a man from Pittson, Pennsylvania was bitten by his friend's pet cobra. The man told his friend “I don't need to go to a hospital, I'm a man, I can handle it.” Instead, the pair decided to go to the pub for a few drinks. The man died after about an hour of drinking. Cobra venom, it turns out, is both slow working and lethal.

5. Mike Hughes was a daredevil who believed the earth was flat. Mike decided to put his beliefs to the test, building a rocket intended to launch him into space. In February 2020 Mike and his rocket launched approximately 500 meters into the air before crashing to the ground.

6. In 1990 a man decided to go fishing in Alaska with his dog. The water was frozen, but instead of breaking a hole in the ice, he decided to throw a stick of dynamite out onto the frozen lake. Unfortunately, the dog thought he was playing fetch, and ran out onto the ice, returning the dynamite to the man.