Using modals to talk about the past

Here are some of the ways you can use modals to talk about the past.

To report speech or thought

The modals typically used for reporting speech and thought are would ('d) (to report will) and could (to report can).

'We'll take care of things for you,' they said.
They said they'd take care of things for us.

'You can come with us – there's plenty of room in the car,' she told me.
She told me that I could go with them, as there was plenty of room in the car.

'This time next week I'll be lying on a tropical beach,' I thought.
I thought I'd be lying on a tropical beach this time next week.

'I'll have finished the work by the end of the day,' he promised.
He promised that he would have finished the work by the end of the day.

To speculate or make deductions

The modals typically used for speculating and making deductions are would ('d), could, might, must and can't. When you use them to talk about the past, you use them with the perfect or perfect continuous infinitive.

I think they'd have arrived by now if they were coming at all.
All this damage couldn't have been caused by just one person, could it? (passive)
The thief might have got in through an upstairs window.
I think I must have left my umbrella on the train.
Your glasses can't have just disappeared into thin air – they must be here somewhere.
The car would have been travelling pretty fast at the time of the accident.
I'm sure I couldn't have been doing more than sixty.
It must have been raining – the pavements are wet.
Is this the best you could do – you can't have been trying very hard!

When you speculate or make deductions about the past, you can use must only in affirmative sentences, and can in negative sentences.

They must have been really worried to have called the police.
He can't have known about the meeting – it's not like him to be late.

To comment or criticize

The modals typically used for commenting and criticizing are could, should, might and ought to. When you use them to talk about the past, you use them with the perfect or perfect continuous infinitive.

You were lucky – you could easily have been injured. (passive)
You really shouldn't have left without apologizing, you know.
I know I ought to have had the car serviced sooner. (passive)
You shouldn't have been watching TV until two in the morning.

You use could have and might have with the stress on the main verb to express annoyance.
They could have told us they were going to be late – we were really worried.
You might have informed me! You knew how important this job was to me!

If you think that someone has been thoughtless, you can use 'How could you?' on its own or with an infinitive.

How could you? You knew that was my favourite CD and you lost it!
How could you do such a thing? How could you have been so stupid?
9 (1) Practice

1 Rewrite the second sentence using the most appropriate modal must, can’t or might so the meaning is similar.

   a) My e-mail wasn’t working earlier. The server was probably down.
      The server must’ve been down.

   b) The wedding was amazing. I’m sure it cost them a fortune.

   c) I don’t know what time it was, but it was still light. So I’m sure it wasn’t that late.

   d) Where is he? Do you think it’s possible he’s got lost?

   e) Where is she? Perhaps she didn’t get the message.

   f) You didn’t get my e-mail? Maybe I sent it to your old address.

   g) You waited for two hours? I imagine that wasn’t much fun.

   h) £60 can’t be right. Surely they’ve overcharged us.

2 Complete the newspaper stories with the modals in the box and the verb in brackets.

   should should would

   Dangerous spectator sport
   The Philadelphia baseball team is being sued by a spectator who was hit by a ball. The spectator tried to catch the ball, but instead it hit him in the head.
   He filed a lawsuit against the team alleging the ball (d) _______________ (not/hit) him if the protective backstop at the Stadium had been wider and angled differently. Specifically, the claimant is seeking $50,000 for his eye injuries because the stadium (e) _______________ (provide) more protection for spectators. The Phillies’ defence lawyer claims that as a regular attendee at baseball games the claimant (f) _______________ (be) fully aware of the dangers, especially as there are warnings on the back of every ticket, on posted signs and through regular public announcements.

   Who’s the rat?
   An episode of NBC’s reality show, Fear Factor, in which the contestants were expected to drink blended dead rats, has resulted in the television network being sued for $2.5 million by a man who claims they (g) _______________ (warm) viewers in advance about the content of the show. Austin Aitkin from Cleveland, Ohio, believes that watching the show caused him to become dizzy and light-headed. He began to feel sick and ran towards the bathroom. He claims (h) _______________ (run) into the door frame as a result of his dizziness, injuring himself in the process.
   Aitkin says that he isn’t concerned with winning money, but that the lawsuit (i) _______________ (highlight) the harmful effects of TV for the public. Aitkin then told reporters that he (j) _______________ (only/discuss) the complaint in more detail if he was paid for the interview.

3 Rewrite the sentences with a phrase using could have or might have to show you are annoyed.

   a) Why didn’t you tell me you’d be late?
      You could’ve told me you’d be late.

   b) Why didn’t she wait for us?

   c) Why didn’t you warn me about it?

   d) Why wasn’t he a bit more helpful?
USING MODALS TO TALK ABOUT THE PAST – KEY

Ex. 1
a. The server must've been down.
b. It must have cost them a fortune.
c. It can't have been that late.
d. Do you think he might have got lost.
e. She might not have got the message.
f. I might have sent it to your old address.
g. That can't have been much fun.
h. They must have overcharged us.

Ex. 2
a. should have been
b. Would have further increased
c. should not have released
d. wouldn't have hit
e. should have provided
f. must have been
g. should have warned
h. must have run
i. would highlight
j. would only discuss

Ex. 3
a. You could've told me you'd be late!
b. She could've waited for us!
c. You could've warned me about it!
d. He could've been a bit more helpful!