



Past Modals (could have/should have/must have): Should Have & Shouldn't Have: Past Regret and Criticism Exercises

Fill in the blank with the correct option.

- I failed the exam because I didn't study. I ____ harder.
a) must have studied
b) should have studied
c) could have studied
d) would have studied
- Tom ate the whole cake and now he feels sick. He ____ so much.
a) shouldn't have eaten
b) mustn't have eaten
c) couldn't have eaten
d) wouldn't have eaten
- She arrived late to the interview. She ____ earlier.
a) would have left
b) should have left
c) must have left
d) could have left
- You told everyone my secret! You ____ them.
a) couldn't have told
b) shouldn't have told
c) wouldn't have told
d) mustn't have told
- We got completely lost on the hike. We ____ a map with us.
a) must have brought
b) would have brought
c) could have brought
d) should have brought
- He ____ that email to the whole company. It was meant to be private.
a) shouldn't have sent
b) couldn't have sent
c) wouldn't have sent
d) mustn't have sent
- I'm so sunburnt. I ____ sunscreen before going to the beach.
a) could have applied
b) should have applied
c) would have applied
d) must have applied
- The children are exhausted. They ____ up so late last night.
a) mustn't have stayed
b) couldn't have stayed
c) wouldn't have stayed
d) shouldn't have stayed
- You look tired. You ____ to bed earlier last night.
a) must have gone
b) would have gone
c) could have gone
d) should have gone
- She ____ that rude comment about his cooking. He was really hurt.
a) wouldn't have made
b) couldn't have made
c) shouldn't have made
d) mustn't have made



Answers

1. b) should have studied
2. a) shouldn't have eaten
3. b) should have left
4. b) shouldn't have told
5. d) should have brought
6. a) shouldn't have sent
7. b) should have applied
8. d) shouldn't have stayed
9. d) should have gone
10. c) shouldn't have made
11. d) should have checked
12. a) shouldn't have driven
13. c) should have spent
14. c) shouldn't have been using
15. a) ought to have started
16. b) should have told
17. c) should have budgeted
18. d) shouldn't have given
19. a) shouldn't have pushed
20. c) should have proofread



Explanations

1. “should have studied” (b)

Use 'should have + past participle' to express regret about something you didn't do. The speaker regrets not studying harder. 'Must have studied' would mean a deduction (you are guessing someone studied). 'Could have studied' means it was possible but doesn't carry the same sense of regret.

2. “shouldn't have eaten” (a)

Use 'shouldn't have + past participle' to criticise a past action — something someone did but it was a bad idea. Tom ate too much (he did it, but he shouldn't have). 'Mustn't have eaten' is not standard English; we say 'can't have eaten' for past impossibility.

3. “should have left” (b)

Use 'should have left' to express that leaving earlier was the right thing to do, but she didn't do it. It expresses regret or criticism about a past action not taken.

4. “shouldn't have told” (b)

Use 'shouldn't have told' to criticise someone for doing something wrong in the past. The speaker is angry because the other person DID tell the secret, but it was wrong to do so.

5. “should have brought” (d)

Use 'should have brought' to express regret about not bringing a map. It was a good idea to bring one, but they didn't. 'Could have brought' means it was possible, but doesn't emphasise that it was the right thing to do.

6. “shouldn't have sent” (a)

Use 'shouldn't have sent' to criticise a past action. He DID send the email, but it was a mistake. 'Couldn't have sent' would mean it was impossible for him to send it, which contradicts the situation.

7. “should have applied” (b)

Use 'should have applied' to express regret. The speaker didn't apply sunscreen and now regrets it. 'Must have applied' would be a deduction that someone DID apply sunscreen, which is the opposite meaning.

8. “shouldn't have stayed” (d)

Use 'shouldn't have stayed' to criticise a past action. The children DID stay up late, but it was a bad idea. 'Mustn't have stayed' is not natural; for past deduction of impossibility, use 'can't have stayed'.

9. “should have gone” (d)

Use 'should have gone' to give advice about the past — the person didn't go to bed early, but it would have been better if they had. This is past advice/regret.

10. “shouldn't have made” (c)

Use 'shouldn't have made' to criticise what someone said. She DID make the rude comment, but it was wrong. 'Couldn't have made' would mean it was impossible for her to say it.

11. “should have checked” (d)

Use 'should have checked' to express regret. The speaker didn't check the forecast, and now wishes they had. 'Must have checked' would mean you are guessing that someone DID check it.

12. “shouldn't have driven” (a)

Use 'shouldn't have driven' to strongly criticise a dangerous past action. He DID drive after drinking, but it was very wrong and dangerous.

13. “should have spent” (c)

Use 'should have spent' to express regret about not doing enough in the past. They didn't spend enough time planning, and now they wish they had.

14. “shouldn't have been using” (c)

Use 'shouldn't have been + -ing' to criticise a continuous past action. The person WAS using their phone while crossing the road, but it was dangerous. The continuous form (-ing) emphasises the ongoing nature of the action.

15. “ought to have started” (a)

'Ought to have + past participle' means the same as 'should have + past participle' — it expresses regret about a past action. It is slightly more formal. The speaker regrets not starting the work earlier.

16. “should have told” (b)

Use 'should have told' to express that informing was the right thing to do, but they didn't do it. The speaker is criticising the lack of communication.

17. “should have budgeted” (c)

Use 'should have budgeted' to express regret about not managing money properly. 'Could have budgeted' means it was possible, but doesn't carry the moral weight of 'should have'.

18. “shouldn't have given” (d)

Use 'shouldn't have given' to criticise a past mistake. She DID give him the password, but it was a bad decision. The negative consequence (he logged into her accounts) confirms the action was wrong.

19. “shouldn't have pushed” (a)

Use 'shouldn't have pushed' to express self-criticism about a past action. The speaker DID push themselves too hard, and now regrets it because of the health consequences.

20. “should have proofread” (c)

Use 'should have proofread' to express that proofreading was the right and expected thing to do before submitting, but he didn't do it. It combines regret with criticism.