



Past Modals (could have/should have/must have): Advanced Past Modals of Deduction: Continuous & Passive Perfect Modals Exercises

Fill in the blank with the correct option.

- When I arrived at midnight, Emma's desk lamp was still warm. She ___ just before I got there — the screen was off but the chair was still pushed back.
a) must have worked
b) must have been working
c) should have been working
d) could have worked
- The neighbours' music was extremely loud at 2 a.m. They ___ a party, but I didn't go over to check.
a) must have had
b) should have been having
c) would have had
d) could have been having
- The suspect claims he was at the gym from 6 to 8 p.m. However, his car was captured on CCTV downtown at 7:15. He ___ at the gym during that entire period.
a) might not have been exercising
b) mustn't have exercised
c) can't have been exercising
d) shouldn't have been exercising
- I called her office five times between 2 and 4 p.m. and she never picked up. She ___ in a meeting the whole afternoon.
a) must have been
b) should have been
c) would have been
d) might have been
- The deadline was yesterday, but Marcus spent the whole week watching videos online. He ___ on the project instead of wasting time.
a) should have been working
b) must have been working
c) could have been working
d) would have been working
- The report contained serious factual errors. It ___ more carefully before it was published.
a) should have reviewed
b) must have been reviewed
c) should have been reviewed
d) could have reviewed
- The bridge collapsed during the storm. Engineers believe the structural damage ___ years earlier when the foundations were laid.
a) could have been caused
b) should have caused
c) must have caused
d) might have been causing
- The painting is clearly from the 17th century. The pigments confirm it ___ before 1650.
a) must have painted
b) should have been painted
c) must have been painted
d) could have painted
- Several students complained that the exam questions had already appeared in a practice test. The questions ___ from the same source without proper modification.
a) might have been taken
b) should have taken
c) must have taken
d) might have been taking



Answers

1. b) must have been working
2. d) could have been having
3. c) can't have been exercising
4. d) might have been
5. a) should have been working
6. c) should have been reviewed
7. a) could have been caused
8. c) must have been painted
9. a) might have been taken
10. a) must have been ... could have got
11. b) may have been ... may have
12. d) can't have accessed ... must have
13. b) may have been conducted
14. c) could have managed
15. d) may have been
16. b) may have been ... might have
17. c) could have been calling
18. b) would be experiencing
19. d) needn't have hired
20. a) must have been revising



Explanations

1. “must have been working” (b)

'Must have been working' is used for a strong deduction about an ongoing activity in the past. The warm lamp and pushed-back chair suggest she was in the middle of working (a continuous activity) right up until shortly before the speaker arrived. 'Must have worked' would suggest a completed action (she finished working at some point), but the evidence points to an activity that was still in progress.

2. “could have been having” (d)

'Could have been having' expresses an uncertain speculation about a past ongoing activity. The speaker heard loud music (evidence) but didn't verify, so they can only speculate — it's possible a party was in progress. 'Must have had' would be too certain given that the speaker didn't confirm it. 'Could have been having' combines possibility (could) with the continuous aspect (ongoing party).

3. “can't have been exercising” (c)

'Can't have been exercising' expresses a deduction of impossibility about an ongoing past activity. The CCTV evidence proves he was downtown at 7:15, making it impossible that he was continuously at the gym from 6 to 8. The continuous form (been exercising) matches the claim of an ongoing activity over a period. 'Mustn't have exercised' is not standard British English for past impossibility deduction — use 'can't have'.

4. “might have been” (d)

'Might have been' expresses uncertain speculation about an ongoing past state. The speaker doesn't know why she didn't answer — a meeting is one possibility, but there could be other explanations (she could have been away from her desk, on another call, etc.). 'Must have been' would be too certain without stronger evidence. 'Might have been' leaves appropriate room for doubt.

5. “should have been working” (a)

'Should have been working' criticises a past continuous failure — Marcus was not working on the project over a sustained period when he should have been. The continuous form (been working) emphasises the ongoing nature of the neglected responsibility. 'Should have worked' (simple) would criticise the lack of a completed action, while 'should have been working' criticises how he spent his time.

6. “should have been reviewed” (c)

'Should have been reviewed' is the passive form of 'should have + past participle'. The report (not a person) is the subject, so we need the passive voice — someone should have reviewed it, but nobody did. 'Should have reviewed' would require a person as subject (e.g., 'The editor should have reviewed it'). 'Must have been reviewed' would mean a deduction that it WAS reviewed, contradicting the errors.

7. “could have been caused” (a)

'Could have been caused' is the passive form expressing past possibility. The engineers believe it is possible that the damage was caused (by something) years earlier. The passive voice is needed because the subject (damage) receives the action. 'Might have been causing' (continuous) would suggest the damage was actively ongoing, which doesn't match the context of a single causative event during foundation-laying.

8. “must have been painted” (c)

'Must have been painted' combines strong deduction (must have) with the passive voice (been painted). The painting is the subject that received the action of being painted. The pigment analysis provides strong evidence, justifying 'must' (near certainty). 'Must have painted' would need a person as subject (e.g., 'The artist must have painted it').

9. “might have been taken” (a)

'Might have been taken' is the passive form expressing uncertain speculation. The questions (subject) were possibly taken from the same source — but this is only a possibility based on student complaints, not confirmed. The passive voice is required because the questions received the action. 'Might have been taking' (continuous passive) would be grammatically odd and suggest an ongoing process of taking.

10. “must have been ... could have got” (a)

This question tests certainty gradation across a deduction chain. The first blank requires strong certainty — 'must have been added deliberately' because deliberate addition leaves clear chemical traces. The second blank requires weaker certainty — 'could have got there through natural contamination' because natural contamination is a possibility, not a certainty. The grading: must > could reflects the different evidence strengths.

11. “may have been ... may have” (b)

'May have been ... may have' expresses balanced uncertainty on both sides. The witness provides some evidence (he was possibly there), but unclear CCTV means the opposite is equally possible. 'May have' is used twice because both possibilities are equally weighted — there's no strong evidence favouring either conclusion. 'Must have been ... can't have' would express contradictory certainties, which is illogical.

12. “can't have accessed ... must have” (d)

'Can't have accessed ... must have' creates a logical deduction chain. The server logs (strong evidence) prove no logins occurred overnight, making it impossible (can't have) that the hacker accessed the system then. By elimination, the breach must have occurred earlier. 'Mustn't have accessed' is non-standard for past impossibility — always use 'can't have' in British English.

13. “may have been conducted” (b)

'May have been conducted' combines formal hedging (may have) with the passive voice appropriate for report writing. In formal reports, writers use passive constructions and hedging modals to present findings cautiously. 'May have been conducted' avoids directly accusing anyone (passive) while indicating possibility (may have). 'Must have conducted' would be too assertive and requires naming the person who conducted them.

14. “could have managed” (c)

'Could have managed' expresses that effective management was a realistic possibility that was not realised. The editorial's phrase 'given the available evidence at the time' emphasises capability — the authorities had what they needed but failed to act effectively. 'Would have managed' would require an implied hypothetical condition and suggests a different framing. 'Must have managed' is a deduction that they DID manage effectively, contradicting 'than they did'. 'Might have managed' is too uncertain for the editorial's assertive tone.

15. “may have been” (d)

'May have been' is the appropriate hedge for academic writing where the conclusion is tentative. The phrase 'though further research is needed' signals uncertainty, matching 'may have been' (possible but unconfirmed). Academic papers use 'may have been' to present hypotheses cautiously. 'Must have been' would be too assertive for a preliminary finding. The passive voice (been exacerbated) is standard in academic register.

16. “may have been ... might have” (b)

Both 'may have been' and 'might have' express roughly equal possibility, which matches 'either is equally possible'. At C1 level, 'may have' and 'might have' are often interchangeable for past speculation, with 'may' being very slightly more formal. The first option uses passive voice (been informed — by the office) while the second uses active voice (heard — from a colleague), both grammatically matching their contexts.

17. “could have been calling” (c)

'Could have been calling' expresses speculation about an ongoing past activity over a sustained period. The continuous form (been calling) emphasises the duration — residents may have been repeatedly calling for help throughout the entire hour. 'Could have called' (simple) would suggest a single completed action of calling, missing the sense of ongoing, desperate attempts over time.

18. “would be experiencing” (b)

'Would be experiencing' is a mixed conditional: past condition (had invested, twenty years ago) with a present result (today). Since the result refers to the current situation, we use 'would + present continuous' (would be experiencing), not 'would have + past participle'. 'Would have experienced' would refer to a completed past result, but 'today' clearly points to the present.

19. “needn't have hired” (d)

'Needn't have hired' indicates she DID hire the extra staff, but it turned out to be unnecessary because so few guests came. 'Didn't need to hire' would suggest she knew in advance it was unnecessary and therefore probably didn't hire them — but she did hire them. 'Shouldn't have hired' would imply moral criticism of a bad decision, while 'needn't have hired' simply states the action was unnecessary in hindsight.

20. “must have been revising” (a)

'Must have been revising' combines strong deduction (must have) with the continuous aspect (been revising) to describe an ongoing, repeated process. The evidence — three different inks — strongly supports the conclusion (must), and the process of revising at various stages was ongoing and iterative (continuous form). 'Could have revised' would be too uncertain given the physical evidence. 'Should have revised' would express criticism rather than deduction.