Modal verbs: Past   *Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince*

Explanations

Ability

Could and *was able to*

To talk about general past ability we use *could.*

*When I was young, I **could run** very fast.*

To talk about one specific past action we use *was able to.*

*Luckily, Mary **was able to help** us.*

Certainty and uncertainty

- *Must have* and *can't have*

  These are used to make logical deductions about past actions.

  *I **must have left** my wallet in the car.* (I am sure I did)

  *Jim **can't have noticed** you.*   (I am sure he didn't)

- *May have, might have* and *could have*

  These express possibility or uncertainty about past actions.

  *Jean **might have missed** the train.*   (perhaps she did)

  *He **may not have received** the letter.* (perhaps he didn't)

  *You **could have been killed!***   (it was a possibility)

- *Was/Were to have*

  This describes something which was supposed to happen, but didn't. It is formal in use.

  *He **was to have left** yesterday.*

  (He was supposed to leave, but he didn't)

Obligation

- *Had to*

  Must has no past form, so we use *had to.*

  *Sorry I'm late, I **had to take** the children to school.*

  The question form is *Did you have to?*

  ***Did** you **have to work** late yesterday?*

- *Should have* and *ought to have*

  These express the feeling that a mistake was made. There is a criticism.

  *I **should have posted** this letter yesterday.*

  (I didn't do the right thing)

  *You **shouldn't have told** me the answer.*

  (You were wrong to do **so)**

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

  There is a slight difference between these two forms. Compare:

*I **needn't have arrived** at seven.*

(I arrived at seven, but it wasn't necessary)

*I **didn't need to arrive** at seven.*

(We don't know when I arrived - maybe seven or later)

But in everyday speech we often use *didn't need to* for both cases.

Pronunciation and writing

In speech, *have* is often contracted in the forms in this unit.

*I **must've left** my wallet in the car.*

Indirect speech

Must and *shall*

In indirect speech (see Grammar 6) *must* is reported as *must* or *had to*. *Shall* is reported as *should*.

*'You must go.' He told me I **must** go.*

*He told me I **had to** go.*

*'Shall I help?' He asked if he **should help**.*