

# Possibility, probability and deduction: *may, might, could; should, ought to; must, can't*

## A Starting activities

### 1 I must be dreaming!

*must* and *can't* for deduction in the present

Work in pairs or groups. Say as many *must* and *can't* sentences as you can think of for each of the pictures below. Give reasons for your deductions. Example (picture 1): *He must be a car thief. He's breaking into that car. He can't be the owner of that car. He hasn't got a key.*



### 2 Which is which? I

Possibility, probability and deduction in the present and future

Work as a class. Complete the grid. Use *may, might* or *could* for possibility and *should* or *ought to* for probability. Use *must* or *can't* for deduction. Part of the grid is completed for you.

Present and future time

|             | Positive                               | Negative | Question                              |
|-------------|--|----------|---------------------------------------|
| Possibility | <i>He may/might/could be in London</i> |          |                                       |
| Probability |  |          | <i>Should he be in London by now?</i> |
| Deduction   |  |          |                                       |

When you have finished, look at Activity note 52 on page 153.

### 3 Which is which? II

Possibility, probability and deduction in the past

Work as a class or in pairs. Complete this grid in the same way that you completed the grid above.

Past time

|             | Positive                                      | Negative | Question                              |
|-------------|---|----------|---------------------------------------|
| Possibility | <i>He may/might/could have gone to London</i> |          |                                       |
| Probability |   |          | <i>Should he have been in London?</i> |
| Deduction   |   |          |                                       |

When you have finished, look at Activity note 15 on page 140.

# B Grammar guide

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## 1 Possibility

- To talk about a present or future possibility we use *may*, *might* or *could* + infinitive without *to*.  
*There's a parcel here. It could be from Bill. It might snow next week.*  
NOTE *May*, *might* and *could* can be followed by *be* + the *-ing* form for present and future possibility.  
*They could be watching television. I may be going to Oxford tomorrow.*
  - To talk about a possibility in the past we use *may*, *might* or *could* + *have* + the past participle.  
*He could have got lost.*
  - Questions about possibility in the past, present and future are formed with *could* or *might* but not *may*.  
*Might she have been the wrong person to ask?* (past)  
*Could the answer be 'six'?* (present)  
*Might she be coming tomorrow?* (future)
  - For possibility with a negative in the past, present and future use *may not* or *might not*. The contraction *mightn't* is often used in speech. *Could not* is not used for negative possibility.  
*He mightn't have wanted to buy any.* (past)  
*'Six' may not be the answer.* (present)  
*They might not come tomorrow. They might not be coming tomorrow.* (future)
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## 2 Probability

- If something is possible, it might happen. If something is probable, it is likely to happen.
- To talk about a present or future probability, use *should* or *ought to*.  
*She should be on her way home now. She always leaves work at six.*  
This means, for example, that she has usually left her office by now and we expect her to arrive home soon.  
NOTE *should/ought to* can be followed by *be* + the *-ing* form.  
*Their plane ought to be taking off about now.*
  - To talk about a probability in the past we use *should have* or *ought to have* + past participle. Use *should have* or *ought to have* + past participle to talk about:
    - a something that you expected to happen in the past. You do not know definitely if it happened or not, but you think it probably did.  
*They should have reached London by now.*  
In this example, according to the timetable they have arrived in London but you don't know definitely whether they are there or not.
    - b something that you thought would happen but that did not happen.  
*She should have passed her driving test easily. She's a good driver.*  
In this example, she did not pass her test.
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## 3 Deduction

- We use *must* when we have a good reason for believing something.  
*He's breaking that car window. He must be a car thief.*  
We use *can't* when we have a good reason for not believing something.  
*He's too young. He can't be in the army.*
- For deduction in the past we use *must* or *can't/couldn't* + *have* + past participle.  
*He must have been delayed. He can't/couldn't have read my letter properly.*

# C Activities

## 1 The sad story of Susie Jones

*may, might, could* for possibility in the past

- 1 Work in pairs or groups. Read the sad story of Susie Jones below and make as many sentences (positive and negative) as you can to explain the possible reasons:  
why Susie's marriage didn't take place,  
why she left the country,  
why she had to leave her job in television,  
why she devoted her life to abandoned animals.  
Example: *She might have discovered that her fiancé was already married.*

### The sad story of Susie Jones

Susie Jones was going to get married, but the day before the wedding she suddenly called it off. She left the country and lived abroad for several years. When she came back she got a very good job as a television producer but she resigned unexpectedly six months later. She devoted the rest of her lonely life to caring for abandoned animals.

- 2 Work as a class. Listen to other people's ideas and write down some of the possible reasons for Susie's actions.
- 3 Work in pairs or groups. Rewrite the story of Susie Jones putting in some of the sentences you wrote down.

## 2 The Marie Celeste

*must* and *can't/couldn't* for deduction in the past

- 1 Work on your own. Read the story of the *Marie Celeste*.

The *Marie Celeste* was a sailing ship. It was sailing from New York to Italy in 1872. There was a crew of eight on board as well as the captain's wife and daughter. A month after the journey started, another ship noticed the *Marie Celeste* floating off the coast of Spain. When the sailors from the other ship went on board,

they found everything in place on the *Marie Celeste*. The sails were set, the table was laid for dinner, there was plenty of food in the kitchen. There were toys on the floor in the captain's cabin, as if his little daughter had just been playing. The crew's clothes were hanging up neatly and their boots were all in place. But there was nobody on board at all. And nobody has ever discovered what happened to the captain and his family or the crew.

- 2 Work in pairs or small groups. Discuss what could have happened to the people on board the *Marie Celeste*. Make as many positive and negative deductions as possible. Give reasons for your deductions, where necessary, like this: *There can't have been a storm because the sails were set. The captain must have tried to save his family.*
- 3 Work as a class. Listen to other people's ideas and list some sentences with *must* and *can't/couldn't* for deduction in the past.

## 3 Brilliant James

*should, ought to* for probability in the past

Work as a class. 'Brilliant James' came from a rich family. He could read when he was three and he was very good-looking. Despite all these advantages, he is now unemployed and homeless. In one column, list everything that you expected 'Brilliant James' to do in life but which he didn't do. Write *should have/ought to have* + past participle sentences. In another column, write what actually happened, like this:

Expected

He ought to have done well at school.

What happened

He failed all his exams.

## D Accuracy practice

**1** Complete the sentences. Use *may*, *might* or *could* + *be* + the *-ing* form of the verb in brackets (e.g. *may be doing*). More than one answer is possible.

- 1 'Where's Calley?' 'I'm not sure, she \_\_\_\_\_ (watch) television.'
- 2 'Are you coming on Saturday or Sunday?' 'I don't know. I \_\_\_\_\_ (not/come) this weekend at all.'
- 3 My parents want to come, so we \_\_\_\_\_ (take) them with us.
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_ (John/leave) his job and going to another company?
- 5 Harry \_\_\_\_\_ (not/play) in the team tomorrow. He hurt his leg last week.

**2** Complete the sentences. Use *may/might/could* + *have* + the past participle of the verb in brackets.

- 1 'Why didn't Kim come?' 'I don't know. She \_\_\_\_\_ (forget).'
- 2 'Why didn't Roger answer the doorbell?' 'He \_\_\_\_\_ (not/hear) it.'
- 3 'How did that stain get on the carpet?' 'I'm not sure. The baby \_\_\_\_\_ (drop) food on it.'
- 4 John thinks Mr Wright \_\_\_\_\_ (tell) police.
- 5 He \_\_\_\_\_ (go out) without telling me; but he usually tells me.

**3** Complete the sentences. Use *should/ought to* + *have* + the past participle of the verb in brackets.

- 1 Ben's late. He \_\_\_\_\_ (be) here ages ago.
- 2 I hope she isn't waiting for a bus. I \_\_\_\_\_ (tell) her there are no buses today.
- 3 The other team weren't very good, so our team really \_\_\_\_\_ (win).
- 4 That parcel was posted last month. It \_\_\_\_\_ (arrive) a long time ago.
- 5 It's too late to revise for the exam now. You \_\_\_\_\_ (do) more work earlier on.

**4** Complete the sentences. Use *must* or *can't/couldn't* + *have* + the past participle of the verb in brackets (e.g. *must have done*).

- 1 You \_\_\_\_\_ (be) at the disco last night, it was closed.
- 2 I told you that before. You \_\_\_\_\_ (be) listening.
- 3 The light's on. They \_\_\_\_\_ (get) home before we did.
- 4 You know where the park is, don't you? You \_\_\_\_\_ (pass) it on your way here.
- 5 She \_\_\_\_\_ (go) very far. She's left her bicycle here.

**5** These sentences about possibility, probability and deduction are wrong. Correct them.

- 1 I don't know who gave me this book. It should have been my parents.
- 2 Mr Ridley says he had left the building before the money was stolen, but may he have come back later?
- 3 She shouldn't be out so late. Look at her, she mustn't be more than fifteen.
- 4 You must have been Arthur's sister. Hello, I'm Jim.
- 5 I've just phoned Henry's parents. They say he's just left them. The journey takes two hours. It's five o'clock now, so he really may arrive here by seven.