

31 Possibility

1 Present possibility

We use *can* to talk about things which are generally possible:

*Health insurance **can be** very expensive.* (= It is sometimes expensive.)

ACADEMIC ENGLISH We commonly use *may* in academic and scientific English:

*Over-prescribing of antibiotics **may lead** to the rapid development of resistant strains.*

We usually use *may*, *might* and *could* to talk about specific possibilities:

*This rash **may/might/could be** a symptom of something more serious.*

*Mark isn't home yet – he **may/might/could be working** late at the office.*

*✗ There ~~can be~~ life on Mars. ✓ There **may be** life on Mars.*

When we ask about possibility, we often start the question with *Do you think*:

***Do you think** the shops **might be** open today?*

We use *may well*, *might well* and *could well* when we talk about a strong possibility:

*Don't worry, the payment **could well be** in the post.* (= It is probably in the post.)

To describe possibilities which depend on certain conditions we use *could* or *might*

(► Unit 38.1): *She **could learn** much more quickly if she paid attention.*

When we think that something is POSSIBLY NOT the case we use *might not* or *may not*:

*The shops **may not/might not be** open today; it's a public holiday.*

When we are certain something is DEFINITELY NOT the case, we use *can't*:

*You really **can't drive** to Oxford in under an hour.* (I'm sure about this, it's impossible.)

2 Future possibility

We use *will/won't be able to* to talk about future possibility or impossibility:


*We'll **be able to get** a coffee at the theatre but we **won't be able to eat** until after the show.*

We use *may*, *might* or *could* to talk about future actions which are less certain:

*The directors **may call** a stockholders' meeting.* (= Perhaps they will call a meeting.)

We usually use *could* for a weaker possibility than *may* or *might*:

*You never know, she **could find** a perfect job tomorrow.* (It's possible, but unlikely.)

 We do not use *could not/couldn't* to say something is definitely impossible in the present or future:

✗ The shops ~~couldn't be~~ open today. ✗ The optician ~~couldn't see~~ you tomorrow.

*✓ The optician **won't be able to** see you tomorrow. ✓ The optician **can't** see you tomorrow.*

(for future arrangements that are not possible)

We sometimes use *may/might + have + past participle* to talk about a possible completed action by a time in the future:

*Call me next Tuesday; I **might have finished** the project by then.*

3 Past possibility

We use *could* to talk about general possibility in the past (things which sometimes happened):

*Teachers **could be** very strict at my old school.* (= Sometimes they were strict.)

ACADEMIC ENGLISH We use *might* in the same way in academic and scientific English:

*Wealthy Victorian families **might employ** as many as a dozen indoor servants.*

We use *could/might + have + past participle* to talk about a specific past possibility:

*She **might have done** it; she had the opportunity and the motive.* (= Perhaps she did it ...)

*John **could have posted** the letter.* (I'm not sure whether he did or not.)

We also use *might have* for a past opportunity which we know was not taken:

*I **might have gone** to drama school, but I chose history instead.*

(= I had the opportunity but I didn't go.)