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Grammar Reference

Past modals and phrasal modals of obligation

“**Had to**”, a phrasal modal of obligation, is used to show that there was no choice about doing something. Note that “must” is not used in the past.

“**Didn’t have to**” is used to show no obligation, meaning there is complete choice about doing something.

Example:

My sister **had to go** to the doctor on Saturdays.

My brother **didn’t have to take** the math class, but he wanted to.

Form:

...+ had to + verb (base form) + ...

... + did not + have to + verb (base form) + ...

“**Was/wasn’t supposed to**”, a phrasal modal of obligation, is used when there was a general expectation that an action was required or prohibited.

Example:

He **was supposed to be** here and meet his uncle.
(But he probably didn’t.)

She **wasn’t supposed to drive** the car to school. (But she probably did.)

Form:

... + was/wasn’t supposed to + verb (base form) + ...

“**Should/shouldn’t have + past participle**”, a past modal, is used when there was a good idea or a correct action in a particular situation, but it was or was not done.

Example:

He **should have studied** for the test last night. (But he didn’t.)

She **shouldn’t have bought** that watch. (But she did.)

Form:

... + should have + verb (past participle) + ...

“**Needn’t have + past participle**”, a past modal, is used when something was done, but it was not necessary or a waste of time.

Example:

You **needn't have bought** so much food. I wasn't hungry. (But you did.)

Form:

... + needn't have + verb (past participle) + ...

“**Needed to**” or “**didn't need to**” is used to when the action was considered to be necessary or unnecessary. However, unlike “had to”, there is a choice about doing or not doing the action.

Example:

She **needed to make** an appointment with her dentist.

He **didn't need to buy** the textbook for his morning class.

Form:

... + needed to + verb (base form) + ...

... did not + need to + verb (base form) + ...

Modals with multiple uses

To show that the probability of something happening in the past was pretty certain, use “must have + past participle”, “must not have + past participle”, “can't have + past participle”, or “couldn't have + past participle”.

Example:

She had a stomachache last night after dinner. She **must have eaten** too much.

He was at a movie with me last night. You **couldn't have seen** him at the mall.

Form:

... + must have/must not have/can't have/couldn't have + past participle + ...

To show that an action was possible in the past but with some uncertainty, use “could have”, “may have”, “might have”, “may not have”, or “might not have”.

Example:

David is usually here by now. He **could/may/might have missed** the bus this morning.

Lisa was supposed to meet me before school. She **may/might not have gotten** the message.

Form:

... + could have/may have/might have/may not have/might not have + past participle + ...

To give opinions or advice, there are a greater number of modals available for talking about the present or future than there are for the past.

Present or future: Use “must (not)”, “have to”, “have got to”, “had better (not)”, or “should (not)”.

Example:

Parents **have got to** monitor the shows their children watch.

The kids **had better not** spend so much time indoors playing computer games.

Past: Use “should (not) have”

Example:

I **should have listened** to the advice my parents gave me about having a healthy lifestyle.

We **should not have ignored** the scientists’ warnings about global warming.

Form:

... + must (not)/have to/have got to/had better (not)/should (not) + verb (base form) + ...