

COULD WOULD SHOULD

I would if I could, but I can't so I won't

COULD

1. Expressing ability (sometimes possibility or suggestion)

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|-----------------------------------|---|
| I could run that race. | <i>(I have the ability to run it)</i> |
| I could become a mime | <i>(It's a possibility—I have the ability to do it)</i> |
| We could go to the circus. | <i>(We have the ability to go—it's a suggestion)</i> |

2. Using the conditional (generally with an “if” clause)

- If I try, I **can** break the world record.
(REAL—I have the ability to break the record and it is a very real possibility)
- If I tried, I **could** break the world record.
(UNREAL—I might have the ability but probably will not try to do it)
- If I had tried, I **could have** broken the record.
(UNREALIZED—I might have had the ability, but I did not do it)

3. Making polite requests

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|---------------------------|---------------|
| Can you help me? | More informal |
| Could you help me? | More polite. |

4. Expressing ability in the PAST

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|---|-----------------------|
| I can eat an entire pizza right now | Present tense—REAL |
| <i>(REAL—I have the ability to eat the whole pizza)</i> | |
| Last week I could eat two pizzas. | Past tense—REAL |
| <i>(REAL—Last week I had the ability to eat two pizzas)</i> | |
| Last week I could have eaten two pizzas. | Past tense—UNREALIZED |
| <i>(UNREALIZED—Last week I might have had the ability, but I did not really eat them)</i> | |

Watch out! “Could’ve” is NOT “could of” but “could have.”

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I would if I could, but I can't so I won't

WOULD

1. Expressing willingness (but often inability as well) or desire

I **would** help you. *(I am willing to help, but I can't.)*

I **would** like a cup of tea. *(I want a cup of tea—but more polite.)*

2. Using the conditional (generally with an “if” clause)

If I **go** to Ann's house, I **will** eat spaghetti and meatballs.

(REAL—I have the ability to go there and to eat the spaghetti.)

If I **went** to Ann's house, I **would** eat spaghetti and meatballs.

(UNREAL—I might have the ability, but I probably will not actually go to Ann's and, therefore, will not eat the spaghetti.)

If I **had gone** to Ann's house, I **would have** eaten spaghetti and meatballs.

(UNREALIZED—I might have had the ability to go there and eat spaghetti, but I neither went to Ann's nor ate the spaghetti.)

3. Making polite requests

Would you like to go to dinner? *(Do you want to go? AND Will you go?)*

Would you help me? *(Can you help me? AND Will you?)*

4. Indicating the PAST

When I was a kid, I **played** in the sandbox.

(At a specific time [my childhood] I played there)

When I was a kid, I **would play** in the sandbox.

(At unspecific times [throughout my childhood], I would play there. Expresses an habitual action—something done somewhat regularly during a certain period of time.)

Watch out! “Would've” is NOT “would of” but “would have.”

COULD WOULD SHOULD

Everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.

-Einstein

SHOULD

1. Expressing advisability

‘Should’ *implies*, “*This is a good idea. This is good advice.*”

I **should** study harder for the exam.

(This is good advice. Maybe I will study harder, maybe I won’t—but is a good idea to do so.)

You **should not** eat rotten eggs.

(This is good advice. It will be bad if you eat them. It is a good idea not to eat them.)

I **should have** studied harder for the exam.

(I did not study hard enough for the exam. The result was bad. It would have been a good idea to study harder.)

You **should not have** eaten rotten eggs.

(You ate rotten eggs. The result was bad. It would have been a good idea not to eat them.)

2. Expressing expectation

In this case, ‘should’ means ‘will probably.’

The pie that Mom is making **should** be good.

(I expect [probably with good reason] that the pie will be good.)

It **should not** be a problem if you are late.

(I expect [probably with good reason] that you being late won’t be a problem.)

We **should have** heard from her by now.

(We expected to hear from her, but we have not yet.)

Watch out! “Should’ve” is NOT “should of” but “should have.”¹

Schramper Azar, B. (1981). *Understanding and using English grammar*. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Feigenbaum, I. (1985). *The grammar handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.