

-고서야

only after; not until

Marks the moment something finally became possible or clear. The 야 is what supplies "only" — before that point, nothing.

HOW TO ATTACH IT

Any verb	-고서야	겪다 → 겪고서야
ㄹ stems keep the ㄹ	-고서야	만들고서야
Common partner	비로소	겪고서야 비로소 알았다
Rhetorical use	-고서야 ... -겠는가?	... 성공할 수 있겠는가?
Never takes tense	plain stem only	겪었고서야 is wrong
Neutral sequence	-고 나서	먹고 나서 갔어요

WHEN TO USE IT

Attach -고서야 to a verb stem — no vowel rule, ㄹ stays, no tense in front. The past goes on the final verb.

The main use marks a belated realisation or achievement: 직접 겪고서야 그 마음을 알았다 — only after going through it did I understand. The adverb 비로소 often joins it.

A second use is rhetorical, arguing that something is impossible given the condition: 준비도 없이 시작하고서야 성공할 수 있겠는가? Here the sentence ends in a question expecting the answer no.

Both readings share a note of lateness or inadequacy, which distinguishes it from the neutral -고 나서.

IN USE

- 직접 겪고서야 비로소 그 마음을 알았습니다.
Only after going through it myself did I understand how they felt.
- 한참을 찾고서야 겨우 열쇠를 발견했다.
It was only after a long search that I finally found the key.
- 병이 나고서야 건강의 소중함을 깨달았어요.
Not until I fell ill did I realise how precious health is.
- 직접 만들고서야 그 어려움을 알게 되었다.
Only after making it myself did I appreciate the difficulty.
- 준비도 없이 시작하고서야 어떻게 성공할 수 있겠습니까?
How can one succeed after starting without any preparation?
- 모두가 떠나고서야 조용해졌다.
It only fell quiet once everyone had left.

COMPARED WITH

-고 나서

-고 나서 simply sequences two actions; -고서야 adds that nothing happened until then, usually with a note of lateness.

먹고 나서 갔어요. (ate, then left) / 겪고서야 알았어요. (only then did I understand)

-았/었더니

-았/었더니 reports what you found after acting; -고서야 stresses that the discovery came late and only then.

가 봤더니 없었어요. (I went and found) / 가 보고서야 알았어요. (only on going did I know)

-아/어야

-아야 states a condition for something to be possible at all. -고서야 says the condition was met, belatedly.

겪어야 알아요. (you have to go through it) / 겪고서야 알았어요. (only after going through it)

WATCH OUT

X 직접 겪었고서야 그 마음을 알았습니다.

O 직접 겪고서야 그 마음을 알았습니다.

-고서야 never carries tense. The past is expressed once, on the final verb.

X 밥을 먹고서야 회사에 갔어요.

O 밥을 먹고 나서 회사에 갔어요.

For a plain sequence of actions, -고 나서 is correct. -고서야 implies the second only became possible then.

X 준비도 없이 시작하고서야 성공할 수 있어요.

O 준비도 없이 시작하고서야 어떻게 성공할 수 있겠습니까?

In the rhetorical use, the sentence has to end as a question expecting the answer no.