

-지 못하다

cannot, be unable to — long form

The written counterpart of 못. Same claim of inability, built as an ending rather than a word in front.

How it attaches

Stem type	Form	Example
Any action verb	-지 못하다	가다 → 가지 못해요
하다 verbs	no splitting	공부하지 못했어요
Past	-지 못했다	자지 못했어요
Formal	-지 못합니다	참석하지 못합니다
Spacing	못하다 is one word	가지 못해요 — not 가지 못 해요
Short form	못 + verb	못 갔어요

Notes

Attach -지 to the stem and conjugate 못하다: 가 + 지 못하다 gives 가지 못해요. As with -지 않다, there is no vowel rule and 하다 verbs stay intact: 공부하지 못했어요.

It reports that something was beyond reach — blocked by circumstance, by ability, or by time. Because the long form carries more weight, it often appears where the speaker wants to sound regretful or formal: 참석하지 못해 죄송합니다.

Like 못, it belongs with action verbs. With adjectives the construction exists but means something narrower — 좋지 못하다 is a softened way of saying "not good," closer to "less than ideal" than to "cannot be good."

Examples

- 1 시간이 없어서 가지 못했어요.**
I couldn't go because I didn't have time.
- 2 결과가 기대에 미치지 못했습니다.**
The result fell short of expectations.
- 3 그 부탁은 들어주지 못할 것 같아요.**
I'm afraid I can't grant that request.
- 4 회의에 참석하지 못해 죄송합니다.**
I'm sorry I couldn't attend the meeting.
- 5 아직 한국어를 잘하지 못해요.**
I still can't speak Korean well.
- 6 어제는 잠을 자지 못했어요.**
I wasn't able to sleep last night.

Compared with

못

Identical meaning. 못 is what you say; -지 못하다 is what you write, and what you reach for when apologising formally.

못 갔어요. (speech) / 가지 못했습니다. (writing)

-지 않다

One word apart, opposite implications. 않다 says it did not happen; 못하다 says it could not.

가지 않았어요. (didn't go) / 가지 못했어요. (couldn't go)

-(으)ㄹ 수 없다

Also "cannot," but aimed at impossibility in principle rather than a specific failed attempt. Rules and physical limits take this form.

여기에 주차할 수 없어요. (not permitted) / 어제 주차하지 못했어요. (couldn't find a spot)

Watch out

✗ 시간이 없어서 공부 하지 못했어요.

○ 시간이 없어서 공부하지 못했어요.

This ending keeps 하다 verbs whole. Splitting belongs to the short form: 공부 못 했어요.

✗ 어제 회의에 가지 않았어요. — meaning "I couldn't go"

○ 어제 회의에 가지 못했어요.

않다 suggests you decided against it. If something prevented you, 못하다 is the accurate and more courteous choice.

✗ 답을 찾지 못 했어요.

○ 답을 찾지 못했어요.

못하다 is a single word here, so no space appears inside it. The space only exists in the short form, 못 찾았어요.