

# 못

## cannot — inability, not by choice

Sits in front of the verb like 안, but says something different: not that you don't, but that you can't. English "didn't" hides this distinction, so it has to be learned deliberately.

### How it attaches

| Verb type          | Form          | Example                |
|--------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Action verb        | 못 + verb      | 못 가요                   |
| Noun + 하다          | noun + 못 + 해요 | 공부 못 해요                |
| Adjectives         | use 안 instead | 안 좋아요 — not 못 좋아요      |
| Longer alternative | -지 못하다        | 가지 못해요                 |
| Similar meaning    | -(으)ㄹ 수 없다    | 갈 수 없어요                |
| Pronunciation      | assimilates   | 못 가요 [몬까요], 못 해요 [모태요] |

### Notes

못 marks something as blocked — by circumstance, by lack of skill, by lack of time. 어제 못 갔어요 says you wanted to go and could not. Swap in 안 and you have said you chose not to, which may be an unintended insult.

Because it is about ability, 못 attaches only to action verbs. Adjectives describe states, and states cannot be prevented, so 못 좋아요 and 못 바빠요 do not exist. Use 안 with adjectives.

It splits 하다 verbs exactly as 안 does: 공부 못 했어요. One more thing to know is the pronunciation — 못 가요 sounds like [몬까요] and 못 해요 like [모태요], which is why it can be hard to catch in speech.

### Examples

- 오늘은 시간이 없어서 못 가요.  
I can't go today because I don't have time.
- 매운 음식을 못 먹어요.  
I can't eat spicy food.
- 어제는 잠을 못 잤어요.  
I couldn't sleep last night.
- 저는 노래를 못 해요.  
I'm not good at singing.
- 바빠서 연락 못 했어요.  
I was busy, so I couldn't get in touch.
- 아직 한국어를 잘 못해요.  
I still can't speak Korean well.

### Compared with

#### 안

안 is a choice; 못 is an obstacle. Declining an invitation with 안 갔어요 can sound like you did not want to come, so 못 갔어요 is the polite option when something got in the way.

파티에 안 갔어요. (I chose not to go) / 파티에 못 갔어요. (I couldn't make it)

#### -지 못하다

The longer form of the same idea, preferred in writing and in more formal speech. The meaning is identical.

못 갔어요. (speech) / 가지 못했습니다. (writing)

#### -(으)ㄹ 수 없다

Also "cannot," but it points at the impossibility itself rather than at a failed attempt. For a rule or a physical impossibility it is the more natural choice.

여기에서 담배를 피울 수 없어요. (it's not allowed) / 어제 못 피웠어요. (I couldn't manage to)

### Watch out

✗ 시간이 없어서 못 공부했어요.

○ 시간이 없어서 공부 못 했어요.

Noun + 하다 verbs split around 못, exactly as they do around 안. The same goes for 일 못 했어요 and 운동 못 했어요.

✗ 오늘 날씨가 못 좋아요.

○ 오늘 날씨가 안 좋아요.

못 negates ability, and an adjective describes a state rather than an action. Adjectives always take 안.

✗ 아파서 학교에 안 갔어요. — meaning "I couldn't go"

○ 아파서 학교에 못 갔어요.

Being ill is an obstacle, not a decision. Using 안 here suggests you simply did not feel like going.