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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 3 · Chapter 9 · Compound Tenses

🧩 Putting the Pieces Together — Összetett igeidők

*The last four chapters gave you the separate pieces: the past (Chapters 2–4), the future and helper verbs (Chapter 5), the conditional (Chapter 6), the imperative and the subjunctive (Chapters 7–8). Hungarian builds its longer forms by stacking these pieces, with **volna** and **volt** as the two fixed connecting words. Once you see the pattern, there is very little new to learn.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Three building blocks, all unchanging in the second slot: **past + volna** (would have: *olvastam volna*), **helper in the past + infinitive** (*akartam menni*, I wanted to go), and **helper + volna** for "should have / could have" (*mennem kellett volna*, I should have gone). The person shows on the first verb only.

1. past + volna: "would have"

You met this in Chapter 6. The past verb carries the person (and the definite or indefinite set), and *volna* is fixed. It is also the pattern behind regret and unreal conditions.

HUNGARIAN	ENGLISH
Elmentem volna.	I would have gone.
Elolvastuk volna a levelet.	We would have read the letter.
Nem mondtam volna.	I wouldn't have said it.
Ha otthon lettem volna, felvettem volna.	If I had been at home, I would have picked it up.

2. Helper verbs in the past

A helper in the past takes an infinitive, just as in the present (Chapter 5); only the helper changes. The past forms come from Chapter 4: *akartam, tudtam, szerettem, próbáltam,*

kellett, lehetett, szabad volt.

HUNGARIAN	ENGLISH	NOTE
Akartam menni.	I wanted to go.	past of *akar*
Nem tudtam aludni.	I couldn't sleep.	past of *tud*
Szerettem olvasni.	I used to like reading.	past of *szeret*
Mennem kellett.	I had to go.	personal infinitive + *kellett*
Nem lehetett parkolni.	One couldn't park.	impersonal
Mehettem.	I was allowed to go.	-het stem in the past

3. Helper + volna: "should have, could have, would have liked"

Put **volna** after the past form of the helper. This gives the most useful regret and politeness phrases in the language.

HUNGARIAN	ENGLISH	PATTERN
Mennem kellett volna.	I should have gone.	personal infinitive + kellett volna
Jönnöd kellett volna.	You should have come.	2sg
Nem kellett volna!	You shouldn't have! (said for a gift)	negative, set phrase
Mehettem volna.	I could have gone.	-het + past + volna
Szerettem volna kérni egy kávét.	I would have liked to ask for a coffee. (a polite "I'd like")	szeretni + volna
Akartam volna menni.	I would have wanted to go.	akar + volna
Lehetett volna jobb.	It could have been better.	lehetett volna

> **Watch out: szerettem volna as a polite "I'd like"**
>
> In shops and offices people say **Szerettem volna egy jegyet venni** as a softened "I would like to buy a ticket". It is more formal than **Szeretnék** (Chapter 6), and it is not strictly about the past.

4. A longer chain: helper + infinitive + volna

The order of the pieces stays the same when you add more: person-carrying verb first, *volna* after the verbs that it governs. The chain below shows every piece from this course in one place.

IDEA	HUNGARIAN
I read	**Olvastam.**
I wanted to read	**Olvasni akartam.**
I would have read	**Olvastam volna.**
I should have read	**Olvasnom kellett volna.**
I could have read	**Olvashattam volna.**
If I had read, I would have known	**Ha olvastam volna, tudtam volna.**

5. Wishes with bárcsak

A wish that did not or cannot come true uses **bárcsak** ("if only") with the conditional or the past conditional: **Bárcsak itt lennél!** (If only you were here!) **Bárcsak tudtam volna!** (If only I had known!)

6. A note on volt: the literary past perfect

Older and literary Hungarian has a past perfect: the past tense followed by **volt**, for an event completed before another event in the past. It is rare in speech. You will mostly meet it in novels: **Már elmentem volt, mikor megérkeztek.** (I had already left when they arrived.)

In everyday Hungarian people use the plain past (**Már elmentem, mikor megérkeztek**) and let the context do the work. The map in Chapter 1 listed it; you only need to recognise it.

🗣️ In Use — Használatban

The compound forms in regret, courtesy and a plan that went wrong.

① A missed train

A:

Lekéstem a vonatot.

I missed the train.

B:

Korábban el kellett volna indulnod.

You should have set off earlier.

A:

Tudom. Ha korán keltem volna, elértem volna.

I know. If I had got up early, I'd have made it.

② At the ticket office

A:

Jó napot! Szerettem volna két jegyet venni Szegedre.

Good day! I'd like to buy two tickets to Szeged.

B:

Mikorra szeretne utazni?

For when do you want to travel?

A:

Holnapra, ha lehet.

For tomorrow, if possible.

③ A gift

A:

Ez a tiéd, boldog születésnapot!

This is for you, happy birthday!

B:

Jaj, nem kellett volna! Köszönöm!

Oh, you shouldn't have! Thank you!

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

IDEA	FORM	EXAMPLE
Would have	past + volna	**Elmentem volna.**
Helper in the past	past helper + infinitive	**Akartam menni.**
Had to	personal infinitive + kellett	**Mennem kellett.**
Should have	personal infinitive + kellett volna	**Mennem kellett volna.**
Could have	-hat/-het past + volna	**Mehettem volna.**
If only	bárcsak + conditional or past + volna	**Bárcsak itt lennél!**
Past perfect (literary)	past + volt	**elmentem volt**

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. "I would have gone."

▼ Show answer

Elmentem volna.

2. "I wanted to go."

▼ Show answer

Akartam menni.

3. "I had to go."

▼ Show answer

Mennem kellett.

4. "I should have gone."

▼ Show answer

Mennem kellett volna.

5. "You (sg) should have come."

▼ Show answer

Jönnöd kellett volna.

6. "I could have gone."

▼ Show answer

Mehettem volna.

7. "You shouldn't have!" (for a gift)

▼ Show answer

Nem kellett volna!

8. "If I had read it, I would have known."

▼ Show answer

Ha elolvastam volna, tudtam volna.

9. "If only you were here!"

▼ Show answer

Bárcsak itt lennél!

10. Which word is fixed and which carries the person in *mennem kellett volna*?

▼ Show answer

Volna and *kellett* are fixed. The person shows only in the personal infinitive *mennem*.

Coming up in Chapter 10: Putting It Together. The whole verb map in one table, a decision procedure (which tense, which mood, which set of endings), an error-spotting clinic, a recap of the course, and a pointer to the suggested Hungarian Grammar 4.

