Beginner
The Use of Can, could and (be) able to

RULES AND EXAMPLES

CAN
1. We use **can** to say that something is possible or allowed, or that somebody has the ability to do something. We use **can** + *infinitive* (**can do / can see** etc.):

Examples: We **can** see the lake from our bedroom window.
‘I haven't got a pen.’   ‘You **can** use mine.’
Can you speak any foreign languages?
I **can** come and see you tomorrow if you like.
The word play **can** be a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't** (= **cannot**):
Example: I'm afraid I **can't come** to the party on Friday.

2. You can say that somebody is **able to** do something, but **can** is more usual.
Example: We **are able to see** the lake from our bedroom window.

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (*present*) and **could** (*past*). So sometimes it is necessary to use **(be) able to**. Compare:

1. I **can't** sleep.
2. Tom **can** come tomorrow.
3. Maria **can** speak French, Spanish and English.

1. **I haven't been able to** sleep recently.
2. Tom **might be able to** come tomorrow.
3. Applicants for the job **must be able to** Speak two foreign languages.

COULD
Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:
See   hear   smell   taste   feel   remember   understand

a. We had a lovely room in the hotel. We could see the lake.
b. As soon as I walked into the room, I could smell the gas.
c. I was sitting at the back of the theatre and couldn't hear very well.

The Use of Can, could and (be) able to

We also use could to say that somebody had the general ability or permission to do something.

Examples:
1. My grandfather could speak five languages.
2. We were totally free. We could do what we wanted. (= We were allowed to do)

COULD and WAS ABLE TO
We use **could** for *general* ability. But if you want to say that somebody did something in a specific situation, use **was/were able to** or **managed to** (*not* **could**):

Examples:
> The fire spread through the building very quickly, but fortunately everybody **was able to / managed to escape**. (*not* could escape)
> We didn't know where David was, but **we managed to find / were able to find** him in the end. (*not* could find)

Compare:

Mike was an excellent tennis player when he was younger. He **could beat** anybody. (= he had the general ability to beat anybody)

but

Mike and Pete played tennis yesterday. Pete played very well, but Mike **managed to beat** him. (=he managed to beat him in this particular game)

The negative of could is **couldn't (could not)** is possible in all situations:

Examples:
> My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
> We looked for David everywhere, but we **couldn't find** him.
> Pete played well, but he **couldn't beat** Mike.

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