

Can, could, be able to and be allowed to

Reminder → C1 – C7

A

Can, could and be able to: ability

We sometimes use **be able to** instead of **can** and **could** to talk about ability. We avoid **be able to** –

☆ when we talk about something that is happening as we speak:

- Watch me, Mum; I **can** stand on one leg.
(*not ... I'm able to stand on one leg.*)

☆ before passives:

- Films **can** now easily *be streamed* online. (*rather than* Films are now easily able to be streamed ...)

☆ when the meaning is 'know how to':

- Can** you cook? (*rather than* Are you able to cook?)



B

If we talk about a single achievement, rather than a general ability in the past, we usually use **be able to** rather than **could**. Compare:

- Sophie **could** play the flute quite well. (*or ... was able to ...*; a general ability) *and*
 She swam strongly and **was able to** cross the river easily, even though it was swollen by the heavy rain. (*not* She swam strongly and could cross ...; a specific achievement)

However, **could** is usually more natural than **be able to** –

☆ in negative sentences:

- I tried to get up but I **couldn't** move.

☆ with verbs of the senses, e.g. **feel**, **hear**, **see**, **smell**, **taste**, and with verbs of 'thinking', e.g. **believe**, **decide**, **remember**, **understand**:

- I **could** *remember* the crash, but nothing after that.

☆ after the phrases **the only thing / place / time**, and after **all** when it means 'the only thing':

- All* we **could** see were his feet.

☆ to suggest that something almost didn't happen, particularly with **almost**, **hardly**, **just**, **nearly**:

- I **could** *nearly* touch the ceiling.

C

Can and could: possibility

To talk about the theoretical possibility of something happening we use **could**, not **can**. However, we use **can**, not **could**, to say that something is possible and actually happens. Compare:

- It **could** be expensive to keep a cat. (= if we had one, it could or it may not be expensive) *and*
 It **can** be expensive to keep a cat. (= it can be, and it sometimes is)

We use **can't**, not **couldn't**, to say that something is theoretically or actually impossible:

- There **can't** be many people in the world who haven't watched television.
 The doctor **can't** see you this morning; he's busy at the hospital.

D

We use **can** to indicate that there is a very real possibility of a future event happening. Using **could** suggests that something is less likely or that there is some doubt about it. Compare:

- We **can** stay with Jake in Oslo. (= we will be able to stay) *and*
 We **could** stay with Jake in Oslo. (= it's possible; if he's there)

E

Could and be allowed to: permission

To say that in the past someone had *general* permission to do something – that is, to do it at any time – we can use either **could** or **was / were allowed to**. However, to talk about permission for one *particular* past action, we use **was / were allowed to**, but not **could**. Compare:

- Anyone **was allowed to** fish in the lake when the council owned it. (*or ... could fish ...*) *and*
 Although he didn't have a ticket, Ned **was allowed to** come in. (*not ... could come in.*)

In negative sentences, we can use either **couldn't** or **wasn't / weren't allowed to** to say that permission was not given in general *or* particular situations:

- I **couldn't** / **wasn't allowed to** open the present until my birthday.

Exercises

15.1 Underline the correct or more natural option (or both if possible). A & B

- 1 Valuables *can / are able to* be left in the hotel safe. Please ask at the reception desk.
- 2 We *could / were able to* finish the hockey match before it started snowing too heavily.
- 3 The rebels *could / were able to* draw on the support of over 20,000 soldiers.
- 4 *Could you / Were you able to* understand Professor Larsen's lecture? I found it really difficult.
- 5 A: Do you want a game? B: Sorry, I *can't / 'm not able to* play chess.
- 6 Look at me, I *can / 'm able to* ride my bike without any help.
- 7 When the firefighters arrived they *could / were able to* put out the flames in a couple of minutes.
- 8 The air was so polluted in the city centre, I *could hardly / was hardly able to* breathe.
- 9 I knew Petra had been decorating. I *could / was able to* smell the paint when I came in.
- 10 *Can you / Are you able to* drive without your glasses?
- 11 No changes *can / are able to* be made to this rail ticket after purchase.
- 12 He *could / was able to* untie the ropes without the guards noticing.
- 13 She looked all over the house, but *couldn't / wasn't able to* find her keys anywhere.
- 14 I was very busy at work, but I *could / was able to* have a couple of days off last week.

15.2 Complete these blog posts with **can**, **could** and **be allowed to** (or two forms if possible). Use negative forms where necessary. A-E

a

We went camping in the north of Spain last July. As you probably know, it (1) rain a lot on the coast, even in midsummer, and the day we arrived we (2) believe how heavy the rain was. Eventually we found a place to camp, in a field next to a beach. We had a new tent – the advertisement for it said, 'This tent (3) be assembled in two minutes with no previous experience.' What a joke! Now, there (4) be many people who haven't had difficulty putting up a tent at some time, but it took us more than two hours. And then, just as it was done, a man came along and said that we (5) camp there – it was private property. So we had to take the tent down again. Then Eva just said, 'Well, we (6) stay here all night. Let's go to that hotel in the last village we drove through.' Unfortunately, when we got there they were full. But they were very kind and we (7) camp at the end of their garden!

b

It is often said that sports coaches (1) be strict, but athlete Lance Jordan's was incredibly hard on him in the year before the Olympic Games. For instance, Lance (2) stay up later than nine, although on his birthday he (3) watch television until ten as it was a special occasion! Of course, all Lance (4) think of was going out with his friends in the evening, and he (5) hardly wait for the Games to finish to get back to a normal life. When he complained, his coach just said, 'Trust me and you'll win gold – you (6) lose!' And his coach was right. He won a gold medal in the 400 metres in a world record time. And on the night of his victory Lance (7) celebrate – by staying up until 11 o'clock! 'But no later,' said his coach. 'The World Championships are only two years away.'