

Can, could, and (be) able to

A

We use **can** to say that something is possible or that somebody has the ability to do something:

- We **can** see the ocean from our hotel window.
- **Can** you speak any foreign languages?
- I **can** come and help you tomorrow if you want.
- The word "dream" **can** be a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't** (= cannot):

- I'm afraid I **can't** come to your party on Friday.

B

(Be) **able to** is possible instead of **can**, but **can** is more usual:

- **Are you able to** speak any foreign languages?

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

- I **can't** sleep.
- but* I **haven't been able to** sleep recently.
- Tom **can** come tomorrow.
- but* Tom **might be able to** come tomorrow.

C

Could and was able to

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

- When we went into the house, we **could** smell something burning.
- She spoke in a very soft voice, but I **could** understand what she said.

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

- My grandfather **could** speak five languages.
- We were totally free. We **could** do whatever we wanted. (= We were allowed to do)

We use **could** for general ability. But if we are talking about what happened in a particular situation, we use **was/were able to** or **managed to** (*not could*):

- The fire spread through the building quickly, but everybody **was able to** escape.
or . . . everybody managed to escape. (not could escape)
- They didn't want to come with us at first, but we **managed to** persuade them.
or . . . we were able to persuade them. (not could persuade)

Compare:

- Jack was an excellent tennis player. He **could** beat anybody.
(= he had the general ability to beat anybody)
- but* Jack and Ted played tennis yesterday. Ted played very well, but in the end Jack **managed to** beat him.
or . . . was able to beat him. (= he managed to beat him this time)

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

- My grandfather **couldn't** swim.
- We tried hard, but we **couldn't** persuade them to come with us.
- Ted played well, but he **couldn't** beat Jack.

Exercises

25.1 Complete the sentences using *can* or *(be) able to*. Use *can* if possible; otherwise, use *(be) able to*.

1. Eric has traveled a lot. He *can* speak four languages.
2. I haven't *been able to* sleep very well recently.
3. Nicole _____ drive, but she doesn't have a car.
4. I can't understand Michael. I've never _____ understand him.
5. I used to _____ stand on my head, but I can't do it now.
6. I can't see you on Friday, but I _____ meet you on Saturday morning.
7. Ask Catherine about your problem. She might _____ help you.

25.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in parentheses.

1. (something you used to be able to do) *I used to be able to sing well.*
2. (something you used to be able to do) I used _____.
3. (something you would like to be able to do) I'd _____.
4. (something you have never been able to do) I've _____.

25.3 Complete the sentences with *can/can't/could/couldn't* + one of these verbs:

~~come~~ eat hear run sleep wait

1. I'm afraid I *can't come* to your party next week.
2. When Bob was 16, he was a fast runner. He _____ 100 meters in 11 seconds.
3. "Are you in a hurry?" "No, I've got plenty of time. I _____."
4. I felt sick yesterday. I _____ anything.
5. Can you speak a little louder? I _____ you very well.
6. "You look tired." "Yes, I _____ last night."

25.4 Complete the answers to the questions using *was/were able to*.

1. A: Did everybody escape from the fire?
B: Yes. Although the fire spread quickly, everybody *was able to escape*.
2. A: Did you have any trouble finding Amy's house?
B: Not really. She had given us good directions, so we _____.
3. A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes. Nobody was around to bother me, so _____.
4. A: Did the thief get away?
B: Yes. No one realized what was happening, and the thief _____.

25.5 Complete the sentences using *could, couldn't, or was/were able to*.

1. My grandfather was a very clever man. He *could* speak five languages.
2. I looked everywhere for the book, but I *couldn't* find it.
3. They didn't want to come with us at first, but we *were able to* persuade them.
4. Laura had hurt her leg and _____ walk very well.
5. Sue wasn't at home when I called, but I _____ contact her at her office.
6. I looked very carefully, and I _____ see a figure in the distance.
7. I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first store I went to didn't have any good ones, but I _____ get some at the next place.
8. My grandmother loved music. She _____ play the piano very well.
9. A girl fell into the river, but fortunately we _____ rescue her.
10. I had forgotten to bring my camera, so I _____ take any photographs.