**Can and Could**

**Can** and **could** are modal auxiliary verbs.

# Can

**Can** is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use **can** to:

* talk about possibility and ability
* make requests
* ask for or give permission

## **Structure of can**

The basic structure of **can** is:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| subject | + | auxiliary verb can | + | main verb |

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without to).

|  | **subject** | **auxiliary verb can** | **main verb** |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| + | I | **can** | play | tennis. |
| - | He | **cannot** | play | tennis. |
| **can't** |
| **?** | **Can** | you | play | tennis? |

## **Use of can**

### **can**for possibility and ability

We use **can** to talk about what is possible, what we are able or free to do:

* He **can** drive a car.
* John **can** speak Spanish.
* I **cannot** hear you. (I **can't** hear you.)
* **Can** you hear me?

Normally, we use **can** for the present. But it is possible to use **can** when we make present decisions about future ability:

1. **Can** you help me with my homework? (present)
2. Sorry. I'm busy today. But I **can** help you tomorrow. (future)

### **can** for requests and orders

We often use **can** in a question to ask somebody to do something. This is not a real question - we do not really want to know if the person is able to do something; actually, we want them to do it! The use of **can** in this way is informal (mainly between friends and family):

* **Can** you make a cup of coffee, please.
* **Can** you put the TV on.
* **Can** you come here a minute.
* **Can** you be quiet!

### **can** for permission

We sometimes use **can** to ask or give permission for something:

1. **Can** I smoke in this room?
2. You **can't** smoke here, but you **can** smoke in the garden.

(Note that we also use **could, may, might** for permission. The use of **can** for permission is informal.)

(Source: Englishclub.com)

# Could

**Could** is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use **could** to:

* talk about past possibility or ability
* make requests

## **Structure of could**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| subject | + | auxiliary verb could | + | main verb |

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without to).

|  | **subject** | **auxiliary verb could** | **main verb** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| + | My grandfather | **could** | swim. |
| - | She | **could not** | walk. |
| **couldn't** |
| **?** | **Could** | your grandfather | swim? |

## **Use of could**

### could for past possibility or ability

We use **could** to talk about what was possible in the past, what we were able or free to do:

* I **could** swim when I was 5 years old.
* My grandmother **could** speak seven languages.
* When we arrived home, we **could not** open the door. (...**couldn't** open the door.)
* **Could** you understand what he was saying?

We use **could** (positive) and **couldn't** (negative) for general ability in the past. But when we talk about one special occasion in the past, we use **be able to** (positive) and **couldn't**(negative). Look at these examples:

|  | **past** | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **general** | **specific occasion** |
| + | My grandmother **could** speak Spanish. | A man fell into the river yesterday. The police **were able** to save him. |
| - | My grandmother **couldn't** speak Spanish. | A man fell into the river yesterday. The police **couldn't** save him. |

**Complete the sentences below; use can/can’t or could/couldn’t:**

1. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ sleep last night. It was so hot!

2. When I was five or six, I \_\_\_\_\_\_ swim, but I \_\_\_\_\_\_ now.

3. My late grandfather \_\_\_\_\_\_ speak French. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ speak anything but English.

4. We're having a dinner party next Saturday, but Bilal \_\_\_\_\_\_ come.

5. When I met David last year, he \_\_\_\_\_\_ swim. He was terrified of the water. Now he \_\_\_\_\_\_ swim like a fish!

6. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ finish my lunch today. I just wasn't hungry at all.

7. There are so many different ice creams to choose from. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ decide. You choose for me.

8. I \_\_\_\_\_\_ find Ben and then I found him in the garden. Now I \_\_\_\_\_\_ find him again. He keeps disappearing!

**Answers:**

1. I couldn’t sleep last night. It was so hot!

2. When I was five or six, I couldn’t swim, but I can now.

3. My late grandfather could speak French. I can’t speak anything but English.

4. We're having dinner next Saturday, but Bilal can’t come.

5. When I met David last year, he couldn’t swim. He was terrified of the water. Now he can swim like a fish!

6. I couldn’t finish my lunch today. I just wasn't hungry at all.

7. There are so many different ice creams to choose from. I can’t decide. You choose for me.

8. I couldn’t find Ben and then I found him in the garden. Now I can’t find him again. He keeps disappearing!