

Can, could and (be) able to

A

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.)**:

- ☐ We **can see** the lake from our hotel.
- ☐ 'I don't have a pen.' 'You **can use** mine.'
- ☐ **Can you speak** any foreign languages?
- ☐ I **can come** and see you tomorrow if you like.
- ☐ The word 'dream' **can be** a noun or a verb.

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

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

B

You can say that somebody **is able to** do something, but **can** is more usual:

- ☐ We **are able to see** the lake from our hotel.

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

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can't sleep. | <input type="checkbox"/> I haven't been able to sleep recently. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tom can come tomorrow. | <input type="checkbox"/> Tom might be able to come tomorrow. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maria can speak French, Spanish and English. | <input type="checkbox"/> Applicants for the job must be able to speak two foreign languages. |

C

Could

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

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

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

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** what we wanted. (= we were allowed to do)

D

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)**:

- ☐ The fire spread through the building very quickly, but fortunately everybody **was able to escape / 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:

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

but Jack and Andy played a match yesterday. Andy played well, but Jack **managed 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 looked for David everywhere, but we **couldn't find** him.
- ☐ Andy played well, but he **couldn't beat** Jack.

Exercises

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

- Gary has travelled a lot. He can speak five languages.
- I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
- Nicole drive, but she doesn't have a car.
- I used to stand on my head, but I can't do it any more.
- I can't understand Mark. I've never understand him.
- I can't see you on Friday, but I meet you on Saturday morning.
- Ask Katherine about your problem. She might help you.

26.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in brackets.

- (something you used to be able to do)
I used to be able to sing well.
- (something you used to be able to do)
I used
- (something you would like to be able to do)
I'd
- (something you have never been able to do)
I've

26.3 Complete the sentences with **can/can't/could/couldn't** + the following:

come eat hear run sleep wait

- I'm afraid I can't come to your party next week.
- When Dan was 16, he 100 metres in 11 seconds.
- 'Are you in a hurry?' 'No, I've got plenty of time. I
- I was feeling sick yesterday. I anything.
- Can you speak a little louder? I you very well.
- 'You look tired.' 'Yes, I last night.'

26.4 Complete the answers to the questions with **was/were able to** ...

- A: Did everybody escape from the fire?
B: Yes, although the fire spread quickly, everybody was able to escape.
- A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes, there was nobody to disturb me, so I
- A: Did you have problems finding our house?
B: Not really. Your directions were good and we
- A: Did the thief get away?
B: Yes. No-one realised what was happening and the thief

26.5 Complete the sentences using **could**, **couldn't** or **managed to**.

- My grandfather travelled a lot. He could speak five languages.
- I looked everywhere for the book, but I couldn't find it.
- They didn't want to come with us at first, but we managed to persuade them.
- Laura had hurt her leg and walk very well.
- I ran my first marathon recently. It was very hard, but I finish.
- I looked very carefully and I see somebody in the distance.
- I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first shop I went to didn't have any, but I get some in the next shop.
- My grandmother loved music. She play the piano very well.
- A girl fell into the river, but fortunately we pull her out.
- I had forgotten to bring my camera, so I take any pictures.