

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 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):

- 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 bedroom window.

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:

- 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 **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.
- Pete played well, but he **couldn't** beat Mike.

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

- 1 Gary has travelled a lot. He can speak five languages.
- 2 I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
- 3 Nicole drive, but she hasn't got a car.
- 4 I used to stand on my head, but I can't do it now.
- 5 I can't understand Martin. I've never understand him.
- 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.

26.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in brackets.

- 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

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

~~come~~ eat hear run sleep wait

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

26.4 Complete the answers to the questions with **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 finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes, there was nobody to disturb me, so I
- 3 A: Did you have difficulty finding our house?
B: Not really. Your directions were good and we
- 4 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**.

- 1 My grandfather travelled a lot. 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 managed to persuade them.
- 4 Laura had hurt her leg and walk very well.
- 5 Sue wasn't at home when I phoned, but I contact her at her office.
- 6 I looked very carefully and I see somebody in the distance.
- 7 I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first shop I went to didn't have any, but I get some in the next shop.
- 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.