

Beginner

The Use of Can, could and (be) able to

RULES AND EXAMPLES

CAN

1. 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.):

Examples: 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 **can** be a noun or a verb.

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- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. I can't sleep. | 1. I haven't been able to sleep recently. |
| 2. Tom can come tomorrow. | 2. Tom might be able to come tomorrow. |
| 3. Maria can speak French, Spanish and English. | 3. Applicants for the job must be able to speak two foreign languages. |

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 the gas.
- I was sitting at the back of the theatre and couldn't hear very well.

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

Examples:

1. My grandfather could speak five languages.
2. We were totally free. We could do what we wanted. (= We were allowed to do)

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*):

Examples:

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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 of **could** is **couldn't (could not)** is possible in all situations:

Examples:

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.