

EXPLANATION

CAN, COULD, BE ABLE TO

Can and *could* are modal auxiliary verbs. *Be able to* is NOT an auxiliary verb (it uses the verb *be* as a main verb). We include *be able to* here for convenience.

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 for *can* is:

subject	+	auxiliary verb <i>can</i>	+	main verb
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The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*).

	subject	auxiliary verb <i>can</i>	main verb	
+	I	can	play	tennis.
-	He	cannot can't	play	tennis.
?	Can	you	play	tennis?

Notice that:

- *Can* is invariable. There is only one form: *can*
- The **main verb** is always the **bare infinitive**.
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The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*). We cannot say: ~~I can to 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:

- She **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.

- A. **Can** you help me with my homework? (present)
 B. 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, 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:

- A. **Can** I smoke in this room?
 B. 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.)

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 <i>could</i>	+	main verb
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The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*).

	subject	auxiliary verb <i>could</i>	main verb
+	My grandmother	could	swim.
		could not	

	subject	auxiliary verb <i>could</i>	main verb
-	She	couldn't	walk.
?	Could	your grandmother	swim?

Notice that:

- *Could* is invariable. There is only one form: **could**
- The **main verb** is always the **bare infinitive**.

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*). We cannot say: *I could to play tennis.*

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 **I** (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.

Could for requests

We often use *could* in a question to ask somebody to do something. The use of *could* in this way is fairly polite (formal):

- **Could** you tell me where the bank is, please?
- **Could** you send me a catalogue, please?

Be able to

Although we look at **be able to** here, it is **not** a modal verb. It is simply the verb **be** plus an adjective (able) followed by the infinitive. We look at **be able to** here because we sometimes use it instead of **can** and **could**.

We use **be able to**:

- to talk about ability
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Structure of be able to

The basic structure for **be able to** is:

subject	+	be	+	able	+	to-infinitive
	subject	main verb <i>be</i>	adjective <i>able</i>		to-infinitive	
+	I	am	able		to drive.	
-	She	is not	able		to drive.	
		isn't				
?	Are	you	able		to drive?	

Notice that *be able to* is possible in all tenses, for example:

- I **was able to** drive...
- I **will be able to** drive...
- I **have been able to** drive...

Notice too that *be able to* has an infinitive form:

- I would like **to be able to** speak Chinese.

Use of be able to

Be able to is NOT a modal auxiliary verb. We include it here for convenience, because it is often used like "can" and "could", which **are** modal auxiliary verbs.

Be able to for ability

We use *be able to* to express ability. "Able" is an adjective meaning: having the power, skill or means to do something. If we say "I **am able to** swim", it is like saying "I **can** swim". We sometimes use *be able to* instead of "can" or "could" for ability. *Be able to* is possible in all tenses - but "can" is possible only in the present and "could" is possible only in the past for ability. In addition,

"can" and "could" have no infinitive form. So we use *be able to* when we want to use other tenses or the infinitive. Look at these examples:

- I **have been able to** swim since I was five. (present perfect)
- You **will be able to** speak perfect English very soon. (future simple)
- I would like **to be able to** fly an airplane. (infinitive)

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