

# May vs. Can | Grammar Quizzes

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**Grammar-Quizzes.com**  
PRACTICE ON POINTS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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## May vs. Can

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**Express permission, a request, a suggestion, an invitation**

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### Permission

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#### MORE FORMAL

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Giving permission, making requests and offering suggestions require the speaker to be aware of levels of formality. Use may to ask permission.

May I smoke here?

No, but you may smoke outside.

You may not smoke inside. (formal)

#### LESS FORMAL

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Can is commonly used in speech to ask permission, especially in questions and negative sentences. (See [notes below](#) regarding formal and informal usage.)

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Can I smoke here?

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No, but you can smoke outside.

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You cannot smoke inside.

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## **A Request**

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### **Permission / Performance**

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### **Request Permission — More Formal v. Less Formal**

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#### **MORE FORMAL**

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May, might and would are used by a person who is asking to do something. Expressions such as would you mind, would you let me and I would like to also respectfully request permission for oneself to do something.

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May I leave early?

May I leave early please?

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Might I leave early? (excessively formal)

Might I leave early please?

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Would you mind if I left early?

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Would you mind my leaving early?

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I would like to ask you if I might leave early? (formal!)

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#### **LESS FORMAL**

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Can and other expressions are used informally in speech to request permission. Often a reason or an excuse goes with the request in order to explain the speaker's circumstances and win a favorable answer.

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Can I leave early? (less formal, often with an excuse or explanation)

Could I leave early? (slightly more formal, often with an explanation)

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Is it a problem if I leave early?

(persuasion)

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We're leaving early, you don't mind, do you?

(persuasion)

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I need to leave, do you mind?

(persuasion)

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Is it OK if I leave early?

(peer to peer)

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peer (N) – a person of the same level, rank, age.

persuasion (N) – attempting to get agreement; bring the other person to accept your reasoning or request

FYI – for your information (not really asking, just passing along information)

## **Request Performance — More Formal v. Less Formal**

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### **MORE FORMAL**

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Would and could are used to ask someone do something. Since the person does not expect a response, the request is followed by a period. Sometimes an explanation or a reason is given after the request.

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Would you please smoke outside. My son, here, has asthma.

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Could you smoke outside please. Smoking is prohibited in this building.

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Please use the outdoor smoking area. (direct — supervisor, teacher, parent, officer)

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Would you be so kind as to smoke outside. (formal)

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## LESS FORMAL

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Will or can is used informally to ask someone to do something.

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Will you smoke outside please. Your smoke is making me cough. (informal)

Will you smoke outside please. (cough, cough [drama])

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Can you smoke outside please. Smoking is prohibited in this building.

The smoking area is outside. (pointing, "not here")

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I'd like you to smoke outside please. (indirect — supervisor, teacher, parent, officer)

I'd like = I would like

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Go outside to smoke. (direct — supervisor, teacher, parent, officer)

Also see [Punctuating Requests](#).

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## **A Request**

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### **Suggestion / Invitation**

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#### **A Suggestion or Invitation — More Formal v. Less Formal**

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##### **MORE FORMAL**

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Shall or would you like are used to suggest or invite someone to do something.

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Shall we go outside?

This suggestion is always "shall we" not "shall you" or another person.

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Would you like to sit outside?

This is used to invite someone (with you) or ask their preference (alone).

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Let us pray. ("Let us" very formal.)

As two words "let us" is formal and is used in motivational speeches—religious, political, and health topics.

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## **LESS FORMAL**

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Let's, why don't we or how about are used to suggest or invite someone to do something in a less formal situation.

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Why don't we go outside? (question)

Why don't we go outside. (request)

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How about going outside? (informal question)

How about going outside. (request)

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Let's go outside.

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## **"Let's" Properties — Is it used as a lexical verb or a modal?**

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### **LETS— "ALLOW"**

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Let is a regular verb when it occurs with the meaning "allow". Let is followed by a "bare infinitive" (plain form verb). She let us (to) go.

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### **HAS A DICTIONARY MEANING, TENSE, AND NUMBER**

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She lets him go out at night. (present)

She let him go out last night. (past)

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### **NEGATION —NEGATES AUXILIARY DO WITH NOT / NO**

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She doesn't let us go out at night. (mostly negates auxiliary do with not)

She no longer lets us go out at night. (except – rarely, hardly ever, never)

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### **INVERSION — INVERTS AUXILIARY "DO" IN QUESTIONS**

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Does she let us go out at night?

She lets us go out at night? (spoken with rising intonation)

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### SHORT ANSWER — INCLUDES "DO"

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Yes, she does. No, she doesn't.

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### INCLUDES AUXILIARY "DO" IN "AND...TOO" EXPRESSIONS

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She lets us go out at night, and he does too.

(Includes auxiliary do in expressions with too)

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### EMPHASIS – INCLUDES AUXILIARY DO IN EMPHASIS

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Everyone says she doesn't let us go out, but she does.

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### LET'S — "SUGGESTION"

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Let is irregular when it occurs with the meaning of suggestion or imperative; it has modal-like properties. See comparison below. (Let's is common in speech. Let us is very formal.)

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### MODAL-LIKE MEANING AND TENSE, 1ST PERSON PLURAL

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Let's go! (present) Let's go out tonight. (future)

\*Let's go out last night. (past)

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### NEGATION —NEGATES WITH NOT / NO

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Let's not go out tonight.

Let's no longer go out at night. (never)

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### INVERSION — HAS NO DO SUPPORT IN QUESTIONS

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Let's go out tonight? (Shall we go out tonight?)

~Do let's go out tonight? (archaic, uncommon)

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### SHORT ANSWER — HAS NO "DO" SUPPORT

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Yes, let's. / No, let's not.

Yes, \*let's do. / ~No, let's don't. (archaic, uncommon usage)

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### DOESNT ACCEPT AUXILIARY MODAL IN "AND...TOO" EXPRESSIONS

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We may go out tonight, and you may too. (a true modal)

Let's go out tonight, and you \*let too. (not a true modal)

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(no equivalent)

lexical verb – a verb that has a dictionary meaning, is marked for tense and number (3rd person). See Modals – Properties.

quasi – resembling, seeming, having some of the features; from Latin "as if"

(Burchfield Let. 3 453) (Garner \*Let's don't. 509)

## **Common Mistakes**

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### **Errors and Solutions**

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#### **Error and Solution**

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##### **ERROR**

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\*May I can smoke here?

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You don't can leave early.

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You can not leave early.

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He may smoke outside. / He may smokes outside.

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Can you let's go now? (urging someone to hurry)

##### **SOLUTION**

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May I smoke here? (Use one modal not two.)

Can I smoke here? (informal)

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You can't leave early. (A modal does not use the "do" auxiliary.)

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You cannot leave early (Write as one word.)

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He may smoke outside. (A modal is not marked for 3rd person.)

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Let's go now? Shall we go now? Shall we get going? Could you hurry please?

## **Practice 1**

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### **Restating a Request**

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### **What is the level of formality?**

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1. Select your response—formal or informal.
2. Compare your response to the feedback by clicking the "check" or "check 1-6" button.

1.

Mail these letters.

2.

Would you please mail these letters for me?

3.

Could you mail these letters?

4.

Can you mail these letters?



5.

Do you think you could mail these letters?

6.

Would you be so kind as to mail these letters?

## **Practice 2**

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### **TV Night**

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**Complete the sentence with a request or suggestion.**

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1. Select the response from the list that best completes the sentence.
2. Compare your response to the feedback by clicking the "check" or "check 7-12" button.

## **Practice 3**

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### **Scheduling Vacation Time**

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### **Read the Context**

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In the conversation below, Alice Ames, Dan Dole and Rita Ross are speaking informally. This is acceptable in some office environments but not in others. Some employers require employees to be more formal, especially in workplace situations where employees interact with clients and customers.

ALICE: Hey, Dan. Can I talk to you?

DAN: Sure. Come on in and have a seat.

ALICE: Do you mind if I take my two-week vacation at the end of May?

DAN: The end of May is busy for us. Can you take it the first two weeks of May?

ALICE: My cousin is getting married on May 21. I don't think I can ask her to change it.

DAN: Oh, I see. Of course not. Let me ask Rita if she can step in for you.

DAN: Rita, can you come to my office.

RITA: One moment. I'm talking with a customer.

DAN: (later) Rita, can you cover the last two weeks in May for Alice?

RITA: Yeah, I think so. Can I talk to my babysitter first? I'll need to arrange childcare.

DAN: OK. Why don't you get back to me tomorrow with your answer.

RITA: I'll let you know as soon as I can.

DAN: Thanks.

client—someone who gets services or advice from a professional person, company, or organization

colloquial speech— language or words that are colloquial are used mainly in informal conversations rather than in writing or formal speech

cover X for someone—do the work of someone else temporarily. Please cover the front desk for me while I take a ten minute break.

customer—someone who buys goods or services from a shop, company

employees—workers

get back to someone—respond to someone; answer at a later time

step in for someone—take the place (job) of someone else

take vacation—go on vacation using time that is allowed by one's contract with the employer

### **Change the conversation to more formal usage:**

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- use last names with Mr., Mrs., and Miss (Ms.)
- use standard English (avoid colloquial speech)
- use polite requests and suggestions

## Edit and Correct

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1. Edit the sentence(s) in the text box.
2. Compare your response to the feedback by clicking the "check" or "check 13-24" button.

13.

ALICE AMES: Hey, Dan. May I talk to you?

14.

DAN DOLE: Sure. Come on in and have a seat.

15.

ALICE AMES: Do you mind if I take my two-week vacation at the end of May?

16.

DAN DOLE: The end of May is rather busy for us. Can you take it the first two weeks of May?

17.

ALICE AMES: My cousin is getting married on May 21. I don't think I can ask her to change it.

18.

DAN DOLE: Oh, I see. Of course not. I'll ask Rita if she can step in for you.

19.

DAN DOLE: Rita, can you come to my office.

20.

RITA ROSS: One moment. I'm talking with a customer.

21.

DAN DOLE: (later) Rita, can you cover the last two weeks in May for Alice?

22.

RITA ROSS: Yeah, I think so. Can I talk my babysitter first? I'll need to arrange childcare.

23.

DAN DOLE: OK. Why don't you get back to me tomorrow with your answer.

24.

RITA ROSS: I'll let you know as soon as I can.

