



IIT Madras

BSc Degree

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MODAL VERBS – CAN OR COULD

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MODAL VERBS

- Can and could are modal verbs.
- A modal verb is a type of verb that is used to indicate modality – that is likelihood, ability, request, capacity, suggestion, order, obligation or advice.
- Modal verbs are can, may, must, shall, will, could, might etc.
- Can and could have the same meaning. The differences are between present and past, informal and formal, strong and weak.

CAN vs COULD

1. Can – Ability (present)

I can play tennis.

He can swim.

2. Could – Ability (past)

I could play tennis when I was in school.

He could beat anyone in swimming in his prime.

CAN vs COULD

1. Could (can) – possibility

The bus could be late. (present)

If you don't study, then you could fail the exam. (future)

He could have been successful in his career, if he had listened to his boss. (past)

2. Can – general possibility

You can fall sick if you get drenched in rain.

Living in New York can cost a fortune.

CAN vs COULD

POLITE EXPRESSIONS

1. Making suggestions – could

We could try Thai food this time.

We could ask the teacher to postpone the exam.

2. Making requests – can and could

Can / Could you pass me the salt, please?

Can / Could I speak to Vaiga, please?

Note: Could is more polite than can.

CAN vs COULD

POLITE EXPRESSIONS

c) Making offers – can and could

Can/could I get you something to drink?

Can/could I help you with that madam?

d) Ask for permission – can and could

Can / Could I borrow your notes please?

Can / Could I take a day off this week?

ACTIVITY

1. Daughter : “Mom, the phone is ringing.

Mom: ----- you answer it? It ----- be grandpa.

2. I ----- run three kilometres without a break when I was a kid.

3. Many swimmers ----- hold their breath for more than 3 minutes under water.

4. ----- I get you something to eat?

5. ----- you send me the details by email, please?

ANSWERS

1. Daughter : “Mom, the phone is ringing.
Mom: **Can** you answer it? It **could** be grandpa.
2. I **could** run three kilometres without a break when I was a kid.
3. Many swimmers **can** hold their breath for more than 3 minutes under water.
4. **Can** I get you something to eat?
5. **Could** you send me the details by email, please?