

The future seen from the past

A

There are a number of ways of talking about an activity or event that was in the future at a particular point in the past. In order to express this idea, we can use the past tenses of the verb forms we would normally use to talk about the future. These forms are often used in reporting (see Units 32–36). Compare the following sentences:

<i>The future from now...</i>	<i>The future from the past...</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> I haven't got much money, so I think I'll stay at home this summer. <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not going to say anything about the exams today, because I don't have time. <input type="checkbox"/> I'm having a meeting with my tutor tomorrow to discuss my work. <input type="checkbox"/> Will you be going alone, or is Jane going with you? <input type="checkbox"/> The exam will have finished by 3 o'clock, so I'll see you then. <input type="checkbox"/> There is to be a meeting of ministers this evening. <input type="checkbox"/> When the school closes, all the teachers and children are to be moved to one nearby. <input type="checkbox"/> As the bell is about to go for the end of the lesson, you can pack your books away.	<input type="checkbox"/> Maureen decided that she would stay at home for the summer. <input type="checkbox"/> I wasn't going to say anything about the exams, but the students asked me to. <input type="checkbox"/> I couldn't go to the match because I was having a meeting with my tutor. <input type="checkbox"/> At the time, I thought I would be going alone, but then Tom said he wanted to come. <input type="checkbox"/> The exam was so easy that most people would have finished after 30 minutes. <input type="checkbox"/> It was announced that there was to be a meeting of ministers that evening. <input type="checkbox"/> As she approached retirement she heard that she was to be moved to a post in a nearby school. <input type="checkbox"/> The bell was about to go when all the children started to pack their books away.

If the future seen from the past is still in the future for the speaker, then either form is possible:

- ☐ It was announced this morning that there is/was to be a statement this evening.

In some cases we don't know whether the activity or event happened or not. Compare:

- ☐ I didn't phone to give him the news because we were seeing each other later. He was very upset when I told him. (= we saw each other) *and*
- ☐ We were seeing each other later that day, but I had to phone and cancel. (= we didn't see each other)
- ☐ They left the house at 6.00 a.m. and would reach Edinburgh some 12 hours later. (= they reached Edinburgh) *and*
- ☐ He was sure that the medical tests would show that he was healthy. (= we don't know whether he was healthy or not)

B

To talk about an activity or event that was in the future at a particular point in the past, we can use **was/were to + infinitive** (for things that actually happened) and **was/were to have + past participle** (for things that were expected, but didn't happen):

- ☐ At the time she was probably the best actor in the theatre company, but in fact some of her colleagues were to become much better known.
- ☐ He was to find out years later that the car he had bought was stolen.
- ☐ The boat, which was to have taken them to the island, failed to arrive.
- ☐ There was to have been a ban on smoking in restaurants, but restaurant owners have forced the council to reconsider.

Note, however, that in less formal contexts we would often more naturally use **be supposed to**:

- ☐ I was supposed to help, but I was ill. (*more natural than* I was to have helped...)

and that **was/were to + infinitive** can be used informally to talk about things that didn't happen:

- ☐ We were to see each other that day, but I had to phone and cancel. (*or* We were to have seen.../We were supposed to see...)

14.1 Write ✓ if the underlined parts are correct. If they are wrong, correct them. (A)

- 1 I'm going to do the washing, but we'd run out of washing powder.
- 2 The concert tonight would be over by about 9.30. We could eat after that.
- 3 When we were passing Mike's house, we thought we'd drop in and see him.
- 4 'Where shall I hang my coat?' 'Sorry, I thought Dawn will have shown you. The cloakroom is through there.'
- 5 The manager of Newtown United said that the team is to be announced at 9.00 tomorrow.
- 6 The second half was about to start, so shall we go back to our seats now?
- 7 I knew that by the morning I would be feeling exhausted, but I just couldn't refuse her invitation to go dancing.
- 8 'Where's Alan? He is supposed to be here yesterday, and there's still no sign of him.' 'I'm about to ask the same question.'
- 9 I didn't phone Tom this morning because I was going to see him when I've finished work.
- 10 DNA testing was to be used by police in the search for the missing Dublin schoolboy. His parents have welcomed the news.
- 11 We are meeting at 7.00 in the Globe coffee bar. Can you be there, too?
- 12 We didn't expect that having a rabbit as a pet will cause so many problems.



In which *three* cases can we use either a past or present tense form in the underlined parts?

14.2 Choose the more appropriate alternative, (a) or (b), to complete these sentences. (B)

- 1 The meeting was to have taken place in the hall,...
a but had to be cancelled at the last moment. b and was well attended.
- 2 She was to have appeared with Elvis Presley in his last film...
a and was a tremendous success. b but the part went to her sister.
- 3 Later, in Rome, I was to meet Professor Pearce...
a but he left before I got there.
b and was very impressed by his knowledge of Italian culture.
- 4 The twenty police officers who were to have gone off duty at 8.00...
a went to the Christmas party. b had to remain in the police station.
- 5 It was to take 48 hours to get to Japan...
a and we were exhausted when we arrived. b but we managed to do it in only a day.
- 6 After the war he was to teach at London University...
a but no money was available to employ him. b for 10 years.
- 7 The bridge was to have been completed this year...
a but a number of accidents have led to delays.
b and is to be opened by the president next month.
- 8 The new road was to have a major impact on traffic in the busy town centre,...
a making life much easier for commuters. b but the crowded roads continued.
- 9 The construction of the cathedral was to have begun in 1650...
a but a shortage of labour delayed the start for a further 20 years.
b and go on for over 80 years.
- 10 We were to stay with Vince in Lisbon...
a many times before he moved to Madrid. b but he moved to Madrid.

Can, could, be able to and be allowed to

Can, could and be able to: talking about ability

A We sometimes use **be able to** instead of **can** and **could** to talk about ability. However, we avoid **be able to** –

- ☆ when we talk about something that is happening as we speak:
 - ☐ Watch me, Mum; I **can** stand on one leg. (*not* ...I'm able to stand on one leg.)
- ☆ before passives:
 - ☐ CDs **can** now *be copied* easily. (*rather than* CDs are now able to be copied...)
- ☆ when the meaning is 'know how to':
 - ☐ Can you cook? (*rather than* Are you able to cook?)

B If we talk about a single achievement, rather than a general ability in the past, we usually use **be able to** rather than **could**. Compare:

- ☐ Sue **could** play the flute quite well. (*or* ...**was able to**...; a general ability) *and*
- ☐ She swam strongly and **was able to** cross the river easily, even though it was swollen by the heavy rain. (*not* She swam strongly and **could** cross...; a specific achievement)

However, **could** is usually more natural –

- ☆ in negative sentences:
 - ☐ I tried to get up but I **couldn't** move. (*rather than* ...I wasn't able to move.)
- ☆ with verbs of the senses – e.g. feel, hear, see, smell, taste – and with verbs of 'thinking' – e.g. believe, decide, remember, understand:
 - ☐ I **could** remember the crash, but nothing after that. (*rather than* I was able to remember...)
- ☆ after the phrases **the only thing/place/time**, and after **all** when it means 'the only thing':
 - ☐ **All** we **could** see were his feet. (*rather than* All we were able to...)
- ☆ to suggest that something almost didn't happen, particularly with **almost**, **hardly**, **just**, **nearly**:
 - ☐ I **could** *nearly* touch the ceiling. (*rather than* I was nearly able to...)

Can and could: talking about possibility

C To talk about the theoretical possibility of something happening we use **could**, not **can**. However, we use **can**, not **could**, to say that something is possible and actually happens. Compare:

- ☐ It **could** be expensive to keep a cat. (= if we had one, it could or it may not be expensive) *and*
- ☐ It **can** be expensive to keep a cat. (= it can be, and it sometimes is)

We use **can't**, not **couldn't**, to say that something is theoretically or actually impossible:

- ☐ There **can't** be many people in the world who haven't watched television.
- ☐ The doctor **can't** see you this morning; he's busy at the hospital.

D We use **can** to indicate that there is a very real possibility of a future event happening. Using **could** suggests that something is less likely or that there is some doubt about it. Compare:

- ☐ We **can** stay with Jim in Oslo. (= we will be able to stay) *and*
- ☐ We **could** stay with Jim in Oslo. (= it's possible; if he's there)

Could and be allowed to: talking about permission

E To say that in the past someone had *general* permission to do something – that is, to do it at any time – we can use either **could** or **was/were allowed to**. However, to talk about permission for one *particular* past action, we use **was/were allowed to**, but not **could**. Compare:

- ☐ Anyone **was allowed to** fish in the lake when the council owned it. (*or* ...**could** fish...) *and*
- ☐ Although he didn't have a ticket, Ken **was allowed to** come in. (*not* ...**could** come in.)

In negative sentences, we can use either **couldn't** or **wasn't/weren't allowed to** to say that permission was not given in general *or* particular situations:

- ☐ We **couldn't/weren't allowed to** open the presents until Christmas morning.

Grammar review: **can, could** → C1–C4; **be able to** → C5–C6; **be allowed to** → C7

- 15.1 Underline the correct or more natural answer. If both answers are possible, underline them both. (A & B)
- 1 Valuables *can/ are able to* be left in the hotel safe. Please ask at the reception desk.
 - 2 We *could/ were able to* finish the football match before it started snowing too heavily.
 - 3 The rebels *could/ were able to* draw on the support of over 20,000 soldiers.
 - 4 *Could you/ Were you able to* understand Professor Larsen's lecture? I found it really difficult.
 - 5 'Do you want a game?' 'Sorry, I *can't/ 'm not able to* play chess.'
 - 6 Look at me, I *can/ 'm able to* ride my bike without any help.
 - 7 When the fire officers arrived they *could/ were able to* put out the flames in a couple of minutes.
 - 8 The air was so polluted in the city centre, I *could hardly/ was hardly able to* breathe.
 - 9 I knew John had been smoking. I *could/ was able to* smell the cigarettes when I came into the room.
 - 10 *Can you/ Are you able to* drive without your glasses?
 - 11 No changes *can/ are able to* be made to this rail ticket after purchase.
 - 12 He *could/ was able to* untie the ropes without the guards noticing.
 - 13 She looked all over the house, but *couldn't/ wasn't able to* find her keys anywhere.
 - 14 I was very busy at work, but I *could/ was able to* have a couple of days off last week.
- 15.2 Complete these texts with *can*, *could* and *be allowed to*. Use negative forms where necessary. Where two answers are possible, give them both. (A-E)

a

We went camping in the north of Spain last July. As you probably know, it (1) _____ rain a lot on the coast, even in mid-summer, and the day we arrived we (2) _____ believe how heavy the rain was. Eventually we found a place to camp, in a field next to a beach. We had a new tent – the advertisement for it said, 'This tent (3) _____ be assembled in two minutes with no previous experience.' What a joke! Now, there (4) _____ be many people who haven't had difficulty putting up a tent at some time, but it took us more than two hours. And then, just as it was finished, a man came along and said that we (5) _____ camp there – it was private property. So we had to take the tent down again. Then Sue just said, 'Well, we (6) _____ stay here all night. Let's go to that hotel in the last village we drove through.' Unfortunately, when we got there they were full. But they were very kind and we (7) _____ camp at the end of their garden!

b

It is often said that sports coaches (1) _____ be strict, but athlete Peter Black's was incredibly hard on him in the year before the Olympic Games. For instance, Peter (2) _____ stay up later than 9.00, although on his birthday he (3) _____ watch television until 10.00 as it was a special occasion! Of course, all Peter (4) _____ think of was going out with his friends in the evening, and he (5) _____ hardly wait for the Games to finish and get back to a normal life. When he complained, his coach just said, 'Trust me and you'll win gold – you (6) _____ lose!' And his coach was right. He won a gold medal in the 400 metres in a world record time. And on the night of his victory Peter (7) _____ celebrate – by staying up until 11 o'clock! 'But no later,' said his coach. 'The World Championships are only two years away.'