

Can, could and (be) able to

A

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.):

- ☐ We **can see** the lake from our hotel.
- ☐ 'I don't have a pen.' 'You **can use** mine.'
- ☐ **Can you speak** any foreign languages?
- ☐ I **can come** and see you tomorrow if you like.
- ☐ The word 'dream' **can be** a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't** (= **cannot**):

- ☐ I'm afraid I **can't come** to the party on Friday.

B

You can say that somebody **is able to** do something, but **can** is more usual:

- ☐ We **are able to see** the lake from our hotel.

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (*present*) and **could** (*past*). So sometimes it is necessary to use **(be) able to**. Compare:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can't sleep. | <input type="checkbox"/> I haven't been able to sleep recently. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tom can come tomorrow. | <input type="checkbox"/> Tom might be able to come tomorrow. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maria can speak French, Spanish and English. | <input type="checkbox"/> Applicants for the job must be able to speak two foreign languages. |

C

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

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

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

D

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*):

- ☐ The fire spread through the building very quickly, but fortunately everybody **was able to escape / managed to escape**. (*not could escape*)
- ☐ We didn't know where David was, but we **managed to find / were able to find** him in the end. (*not could find*)

Compare:

- ☐ Jack was an excellent tennis player when he was younger. He **could beat** anybody.
(= he had the *general* ability to beat anybody)

but Jack and Andy played a match yesterday. Andy played well, but Jack **managed to beat** him.
(= he managed to beat him this time)

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

- ☐ My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- ☐ We looked for David everywhere, but we **couldn't find** him.
- ☐ Andy played well, but he **couldn't beat** Jack.