

Grammar Reference

Present and past modals of ability

Meaning and use

We use **can** or **be able to** for saying that somebody or something has the ability to do something. **Can** and **be able to** mean the same, but we often use **be able to** when something is surprising or unusual.

*Camels **can carry** up to 600 pounds on their backs.
They **are able to close** their noses to keep out the sand.*

To talk about ability in the past, we use **could** or **be able to**.

*20 years ago, the Kalahari bushmen **could make** fire without matches.
They **were able to survive** without fresh water for three weeks.*

For a single event in the past, we use **be able to** (not **could**) in positive statements.

*Our guide **was able to show** us the caves where the bushmen lived.
NOT: Our guide **could show** us the caves where the bushmen lived.*

However, in negative statements and questions about single events, we can use **could** or **be able to**.

***Could** you talk to the bushmen? **Were you able to talk** to the bushmen?
We **couldn't talk** to them. We **weren't able to talk** to them.*

If something is very difficult to do or is very successful, we often use the verb **manage to** instead of a modal verb.

*The bushmen **managed to live** happily in their natural environment for at least 20,000 years.*

Form

After **can/can't** and **could/couldn't** we use the infinitive without **to**. We also use the same form for all persons: I, you, he, she, it, we, they. After **be able to** we use the infinitive without **to** as well, but the form of **be** changes: **am/are/is able to** for the present and **was/were able to** for the past.

Positive

*In Yakutia, the people **can speak** both Yakut and Russian.
They **are able to survive** in temperatures of -70.*

Negative

*They **can't grow** vegetables in winter, so they eat a lot of meat and fish.
Most people **aren't able to travel** in winter because of the freezing weather.*

Questions

In questions with **can**, **could** and **be able to**, we change the word order. We don't use **Do/Does**. **Can**, **could** or the verb **be** come before the subject or subject pronoun.

*How **can the people survive** in temperatures of -70?
Why **aren't they able to travel** in winter?
Could they leave the area by April?*

Take note: 'be able to' with infinitives and present perfect

Can has no infinitive form or present perfect form. So in some sentences, we have to use **be able to**.

*I'd like to **be able to speak** Russian. (infinitive)
We **haven't been able to contact** them by phone yet. (present perfect)*

Take note: form of 'manage to'

Manage to is a regular verb in the positive form. But in the negative form we say **can't manage to** in the present and **couldn't** or **didn't manage to** in the past. We also use **did** for questions.

*I **can't manage to eat** all that!
They **couldn't/didn't manage to finish** the race.
Did you really **manage to swim** across the Channel?*

Take note: sense verbs and verbs of thinking

We usually use **can** and not **be able to** with sense verbs and verbs of thinking such as **see, hear, smell, believe, remember**.

*I **can see** the Lena River from here.*

*I **can't believe** that it gets so cold there.*

*The bushmen **could remember** their way around the desert from day to day.*