

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 bedroom window.
- 'I haven't got a pen.' 'You **can** use mine.'
- Can** you speak any foreign languages?
- I **can** come and see you tomorrow if you like.
- The word 'play' **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 bedroom window.

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:

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

but Mike and Pete played tennis yesterday. Pete played very well, but Mike **managed to** beat him. (= he managed to beat him in this particular game)

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.
- Pete played well, but he **couldn't** beat Mike.

26.1 Complete the sentences using **can** or **(be) able to**. Use **can** if possible; otherwise use **(be) able to**.

- 1 Gary has travelled a lot. He can speak five languages.
- 2 I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
- 3 Nicole can't drive, but she hasn't got a car.
- 4 I used to stand on my head, but I can't do it now.
- 5 I can't understand Martin. I've never understood him.
- 6 I can't see you on Friday, but I can meet you on Saturday morning.
- 7 Ask Catherine about your problem. She might be able to help you.

26.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in brackets.

- 1 (something you used to be able to do)
I used to be able to sing well.
- 2 (something you used to be able to do)
I used to be able to
- 3 (something you would like to be able to do)
I'd like to be able to
- 4 (something you have never been able to do)
I've never been able to

26.3 Complete the sentences with **can/can't/could/couldn't** + the following:

come eat hear run sleep wait

- 1 I'm afraid I can't come to your party next week.
- 2 When Tim was 16, he could 100 metres in 11 seconds.
- 3 'Are you in a hurry?' 'No, I've got plenty of time. I can.'
- 4 I was feeling sick yesterday. I couldn't anything.
- 5 Can you speak a little louder? I can't you very well.
- 6 'You look tired.' 'Yes, I wasn't able to last night.'

26.4 Complete the answers to the questions with **was/were able to** ...

- 1 A: Did everybody escape from the fire?
B: Yes, although the fire spread quickly, everybody was able to escape.
- 2 A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes, there was nobody to disturb me, so I was able to.
- 3 A: Did you have difficulty finding our house?
B: Not really. Your directions were good and we were able to.
- 4 A: Did the thief get away?
B: Yes. No-one realised what was happening and the thief was able to.

26.5 Complete the sentences using **could, couldn't** or **managed to**.

- 1 My grandfather travelled a lot. He could speak five languages.
- 2 I looked everywhere for the book, but I couldn't find it.
- 3 They didn't want to come with us at first, but we managed to persuade them.
- 4 Laura had hurt her leg and couldn't walk very well.
- 5 Sue wasn't at home when I phoned, but I managed to contact her at her office.
- 6 I looked very carefully and I couldn't see somebody in the distance.
- 7 I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first shop I went to didn't have any, but I managed to get some in the next shop.
- 8 My grandmother loved music. She could play the piano very well.
- 9 A girl fell into the river, but fortunately we managed to rescue her.
- 10 I had forgotten to bring my camera, so I couldn't take any photographs.

Could (do) and could have (done)

A

We use **could** in a number of ways. Sometimes **could** is the past of **can** (see Unit 26):

- Listen. I **can** hear something. (*now*)
- I listened. I **could** hear something. (*past*)

But **could** is not only used in this way. We also use **could** to talk about possible actions *now* or *in the future* (especially to make suggestions).

For example:

- A: What shall we do this evening?
B: We **could** go to the cinema.
- A: When you go to Paris next month,
you **could** stay with Julia.
B: Yes, I suppose I **could**.

What shall we
do this evening?



We **could** go to the cinema.

Can is also possible in these sentences ('We **can** go to the cinema.' etc.). With **could**, the suggestion is less sure.

B

We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions which are not realistic. For example:

- I'm so tired, I **could** sleep for a week. (*not I can sleep for a week*)

Compare **can** and **could**:

- I **can** stay with Julia when I go to Paris. (*realistic*)
- Maybe I **could** stay with Julia when I go to Paris. (*possible, but less sure*)
- This is a wonderful place. I **could** stay here for ever. (*unrealistic*)

C

We also use **could** (*not can*) to say that something is possible now or in the future. The meaning is similar to **might** or **may** (see Unit 29):

- The story **could** be true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)
- I don't know what time Liz is coming. She **could** get here at any time.

D

We use **could have** (done) to talk about the past. Compare:

- I'm so tired, I **could** sleep for a week. (*now*)
I was so tired, I **could have** slept for a week. (*past*)
- The situation is bad, but it **could** be worse. (*now*)
The situation was bad, but it **could have been** worse. (*past*)

Something **could have** happened = it was possible but did *not* happen:

- Why did you stay at a hotel when you were in Paris? You **could have** stayed with Julia. (you didn't stay with her)
- I didn't know that you wanted to go to the concert. I **could have** got you a ticket. (I didn't get you a ticket)
- Dave was lucky. He **could have** hurt himself when he fell, but he's OK.

E

We use **couldn't** to say that something would not be possible now:

- I **couldn't** live in a big city. I'd hate it. (= it wouldn't be possible for me)
- Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't** be better.

For the past we use **couldn't have** (done):

- We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have** been better.
- The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have** gone anyway because he was ill. (= it would not have been possible for him to go)

27.1 Answer the questions with a suggestion. Use could.

- 1 Where shall we go for our holidays?
- 2 What shall we have for dinner tonight?
- 3 When shall I phone Angela?
- 4 What shall I give Ann for her birthday?
- 5 Where shall we hang this picture?

(to Scotland) We could go to Scotland.
 (fish) We _____
 (now) You _____
 (a book) _____
 (in the kitchen) _____

27.2 In some of these sentences, you need could (not can). Change the sentences where necessary.

- 1 The story can be true, but I don't think it is. could be true
- 2 It's a nice day. We can go for a walk. OK (could go is also possible)
- 3 I'm so angry with him. I can kill him! _____
- 4 If you're hungry, we can have dinner now. _____
- 5 It's so nice here. I can stay here all day, but unfortunately I have to go. _____
- 6 A: Where's my bag. Have you seen it?
 B: No, but it can be in the car. _____
- 7 Peter is a keen musician. He plays the flute and he can also play the piano. _____
- 8 A: I need to borrow a camera.
 B: You can borrow mine. _____
- 9 The weather is nice now, but it can change later. _____

27.3 Complete the sentences. Use could or could have + a suitable verb.

- 1 A: What shall we do this evening?
 B: I don't mind. We could go to the cinema.
- 2 A: I had a very boring evening at home yesterday.
 B: Why did you stay at home? You _____ out with us.
- 3 A: There's an interesting job advertised in the paper. You _____ for it.
 B: What sort of job? Show me the advertisement.
- 4 A: How was your exam? Was it difficult?
 B: It wasn't so bad. It _____ worse.
- 5 A: I got very wet walking home in the rain last night.
 B: Why did you walk? You _____ a taxi.
- 6 A: Where shall we meet tomorrow?
 B: Well, I _____ to your house if you like.

27.4 Complete the sentences. Use couldn't or couldn't have + these verbs (in the correct form):

~~be~~ be come find get ~~live~~ wear

- 1 I couldn't live in a big city. I'd hate it.
- 2 We had a really good holiday. It couldn't have been better.
- 3 I _____ that hat. I'd look silly and people would laugh at me.
- 4 We managed to find the restaurant you recommended, but we _____ it without the map that you drew for us.
- 5 Paul has to get up at 4 o'clock every morning. I don't know how he does it. I _____ up at that time every day.
- 6 The staff at the hotel were really nice when we stayed there last summer. They _____ more helpful.
- 7 A: I tried to phone you last week. We had a party and I wanted to invite you.
 B: That was nice of you, but I _____ anyway. I was away all last week.