

## Grammar notes: ability

### Can and could

**Can** and **could** are modal verbs. They are sometimes called modal auxiliaries because they are generally used with another verb and help us to understand that verb.

Examples of this auxiliary use are:

I <b>can</b> swim	ability
<b>Can</b> I smoke?	permission
<b>Could</b> you lend me £5?	asking for something

In this section I'll only be looking at the 'ability' aspect of **can** and **could**.

### General characteristics of can and could

They do not add -s in the 3rd person singular:

I **can** swim.  
He **can** swim.  
They **could** all drive before I could.  
He **could** drive before I even had a bike.

To make a question you don't have to use an auxiliary verb, just invert the subject and the modal verb:

**Can** you swim?  
**Can** he swim?  
**Could** she read when she was three?

To make a negative sentence, add not or n't to the modal verb:

I **can't** swim (or I **cannot** swim. **Cannot** is one word)  
**Can't** you swim?  
We **couldn't** finish the exam in time.

### Be able to

As I said above, **can** and **could** are modal verbs, and modal verbs don't follow the normal rules for verbs. For example, they don't have an infinitive or an -ing form.

For this reason **can** and **could** are impossible to use when you need to use the infinitive, the gerund or a continuous tense (though the continuous form would be impossible anyway!).

Being modal verbs also means they don't necessarily have a form that can be used for the past or the future, though in very general terms **can** is used to refer to the present and **could** is used to refer to the past.

When you can't use **can** or **could**, you need to use a form of **be able to**. This means exactly the same as **can** and **could**.

Some examples:

I'm sorry, but I **won't be able to** come tomorrow.

**Being able to** speak another language is very useful.

You should **be able to** do this. It's easy!

### [Tense chart](#)

To make things clearer, have a look at the chart below. It shows when you can use **can**, **could** and **be able to**.

Remember that **be able to** can always be used, but that English speakers use **can** and **could** whenever they can. **Be able to** sounds more formal and not English.

present simple	can	am/are/is able to
present continuous	-----	-----
past simple	could	was/were able to
past continuous	-----	-----
present perfect	-----	has/have been able to
past perfect	-----	had been able to
future	-----	will be able to
infinitive	-----	(to) be able to
gerund	-----	being able to
conditional	could	would be able to

### [Notes about tenses](#)

The chart above is only intended as a rough guide. As always with English verbs, a lot of the time the tense you use depends on what you're talking about.

For example, **can** can be used to refer to timetables or schedules in the future, just as the present simple is used normally: *I **can't** come tomorrow, but I **can** come at 3 o'clock next Thursday.*

When talking about the past there's a difference between **could** and **was/were able to**: **could** is used in a more general sense while **was/were able to** is used to talk about more specific occasions: *I **could** run really fast when I was younger. But then I started smoking and my sister **was able to** beat me every time we had a race.*

However, when you talk about the past in the negative **couldn't** and **wasn't/weren't able to** are completely interchangeable:

Sorry, I **couldn't** come yesterday.

Sorry, I **wasn't able to** come yesterday.

The conditional forms are also interchangeable:

I **could** go on holiday if I had more money.

I'd **be able to** go on holiday if I had more money.