
Modals Verbs of Ability

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We use 'can' and 'could' to talk about a skill or ability.

When we talk about ability, we mean two things.

- **general ability.** This is something that once you have learned you can do any time you want, like being able to swim, ride a bicycle or speak a language.
- **specific ability.** This means something that you can or cannot do at a particular time in the **present** or **future**. For example, being able to do something on a particular day, or find something you are looking for.

Present:

can / can't (for both general and specific ability)

- I **can't** dance very well.
- She **can** speak several languages.
- He **can't** drive, he has drunk too much beer.
- We **can't** come now.

Past:

could / couldn't (for general ability)

- I **couldn't** dance at all until I took lessons.
- She **could** speak German when she was a child, but now she has forgotten it.
- I **could** drive when I was 16.
- I **couldn't** ride a bicycle until I was 21.

was able to / couldn't (for specific ability)

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- I **wasn't able to** dance at the party because I had broken my leg.
 - She **was able to** pass her driving test first time.
 - He called the fire brigade because **couldn't** put the fire out.
 - I **couldn't** find my phone.

could + have + past participle (an ability someone had in the past, but didn't use)

- I **could have** played football professionally but I didn't practice enough.
- I **could have** passed my exams if I had studied harder.
- She **could have** married anyone, but she preferred to stay single.

Future:

will / won't be able to (general ability)

- At the end of the course, you **will be able to** speak English.
- I **won't be able to** use a typewriter perfectly until I have a lot more lessons.

can / can't (specific ability)

- I **can't** drive you to the shops, my car is in the garage.
 - I **can** come to the party.
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Exercises

- [Conditional sentences – Complex Test](#)
- [Exercises – Conditional sentences](#)

