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We can use modal verbs to talk about ability (either general ability or specific ability in a particular situation). The modal verbs of ability are **'can'**, **'could'**, and **'be able to'**. Ability can be expressed in the past, present, or future.



via <https://greenforest.com.ua/journal/read/modals-of-ability>

Ability in the present

'Can' is a modal verb that describes what someone *is able to do*, i.e. general ability in the present. It is used in different forms to describe past and present abilities.

- *Peter can cook Italian food.*

Positive statements

In positive statements we put **'can'** between the subject and the main verb in its base form:

subject + can + the verb (infinitive without 'to')

- *I **can ride** a bicycle.*
- ***They can** help you with building your house.*

Negative statements

The negative form of 'can' becomes '**can not**' or contracted '**cannot**' ('**can't**):

- *Jeffrey **cannot play** the piano.*
- *She **can't go** with us because she's sick.*

Questions

Questions with 'can' are formed by swapping the subject and the modal verb:

Can + subject + the verb (infinitive without 'to')

- ***Can Jane** play tennis?*
- ***Can he** drive a car?*

Ability in the past

Could

To talk about ability in the past we use '**could**', which is the past form of 'can'.

- *I **can't dance** rumba now (present ability), but I **could** when I was younger (past ability).*
- *I **could read** when I was four.*

The negative form of 'could' is '**could not (couldn't)**'. '**Couldn't**' can be used to describe general and specific ability in the past:

- *I **couldn't go** to that restaurant because it was too expensive. (general ability)*
- *My grandfather **couldn't swim**. (general ability)*
- *He called us because he **couldn't find** the house. (specific ability)*
- *I **couldn't open** the window. (specific ability)*

Was able to

To talk about for specific ability in a particular situation in the past we can also use '**was able to**'. The negative form of '*was able to*' is '**wasn't able to**' or '**was unable to**'.

- *When the computer crashed yesterday, I **was able to fix** it.* (not 'I could fix it')
- *She **was able to pass** the exam, even though she hadn't studied much.* (not 'she could pass')

Could have + Past Participle

To talk about an ability someone had in the past, but didn't use, we can use '**could have + Past Participle**':

- *I **could have passed** the test well but I didn't practise enough.*
- *He **could have come** earlier.*

Ability in the future

We don't use '*can*' to describe general ability in the future. Instead, we use '**will be able to**':

- *Peter **can play** the accordion quite well (present ability). In a year or two he **will be able to** give concerts (future ability).*
- *Next Sunday I **will be able to** see the new fountains in the park.*

Negative statements about future ability are formed using '**won't be able to**' or '**will be unable to**':

- *If you don't study well, you **won't be able to** find a good job.*
- *Sorry, **I'll be unable to** call him at 2 PM. I'll be in a meeting at that time.*

BUT sometimes we can use '**can**' to describe a specific future ability:

- *I **can help** you tomorrow.*
- *I **can't come** to the party.*

Watch this video from mmmEnglish to see how the modal verbs of ability are used:

See also:

[Modal Verbs: Overview](#)

[Modal Verbs for Possibility](#)

[Modal Verbs for Deduction](#)