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