Modal verbs ‘**can**’, ‘**could**’ and ‘**may**’ are used to politely ask for permission, to make a request, and to offer help to someone.

via https://blog.off2class.com/teaching-can-and-could/

# Asking for permission

Unlike statements, when asking for permission or making a request, we use reverse order, i.e. the modal verb goes before the subject:

**Can / Could / May + subject + the verb**

## Informal

We often use the modal verb ‘**can**’ to ask for permission or to make a request:

- **Can I** have some cookies? – Yes, you can.
- **Can I** borrow your pen, please? – Sure!
- **Can I** use your bathroom? – Of course!

‘**Can**’ is the least formal of these verbs. We use it when we are asking a friend or someone we know for something in an informal situation; or if we are asking someone we don’t know for something which is small or unimportant. For example:

- **Can I** open the window?
Polite

— ‘Could’ is a little more polite than ‘can’, so we can use it in more formal situations, like talking to your boss or a stranger, or to ask for something more important:

- *Excuse me, could I sit here, please?* – I’m sorry, but you can’t. This seat is taken.
- *Could I have your attention, sir?* – Sure.
- *Could you tell me the way to the town center, please?* – Of course, it’s straight ahead.

— ‘May’ is similar to ‘could’ but it is even more polite, and also a little old-fashioned, so it is not used as often:

- *May I make an appointment for Tuesday?* – Yes, you may.
- *May I begin?* – Of course.
- *May I have a glass of water?* – Sure, here you are.

Note: Like in examples above, we can give someone permission with the words ‘can’ or ‘may’, or we can say ‘yes’, ‘of course’ or ‘sure.’

Request

We can use the verbs ‘can’ and ‘could’ to ask for something.

Like with asking permission, the verb ‘can’ is used in more informal situations, while ‘could’ and ‘may’ are suitable for polite requests.

- *Can you help me lift this box?*
- *Could I please use your bathroom?*
- *May I use your phone?*
Giving permission

We can use modal verbs ‘can’ and ‘may’ (but NOT ‘could’) to give permission or say that someone has permission. The difference between them is the same as in previous examples: ‘may’ is a more formal and polite way of saying that, while ‘can’ is used in formal situations.

- You can come with us.
- Students can sit anywhere.
- You may go home now, if you like.
- Students may travel free.

To give permission, we can say something like ‘Yes, you can’ or ‘Yes, of course / Yes, no problem.’ ‘Yes, you may’ is very formal and not used very often.

To refuse permission responses include ‘No, sorry, you can’t’ and ‘I’m afraid not’. Again, using may not is very formal and a little old-fashioned, so ‘No, you may not’ is quite unusual.

Offering help

‘Can’ and ‘may’ can also be used to offer help. ‘May’ is used in more formal situations:

- Can I help you carry those bags? – Yes, please.
- Can I get you a drink? – No, thank you.
- May I take your coat? – Of course.

Sometimes we can use ‘shall’ to see if someone wants you to do something. This verb is not typical for US English:

- That backpack looks heavy. Shall I carry it for you? (Do you want me to?)
- Yes, please.

- Shall I open the window? (Do you want me to?)
Good idea, it’s too hot in here.

Let’s summarize:

Modal Verbs: Permission

- **May**
  - May I ask a question?
  - You may borrow my car if you are careful.
  - Students may borrow books for 14 days.

- **Could**
  - Could I sit here?

- **Can**
  - Can I use your pencil?
  - You can borrow this shirt.
  - Students can use the computers at any time.

American English at State

Watch this short video from American English to see how the verbs ‘can’, ‘may’ and ‘could’ can be used to ask and give permission:

See also:

Modal Verbs: Overview
Modal Verbs for Possibility

Modal Verbs for Ability