

Can vs could

CEFR A2-B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Can for now, could for the past and for polite requests, plus the one past situation that refuses could.

The rule

Can: present ability

- Use can for a skill or ability now: "I can swim", "She can speak three languages."
- Negative: cannot or can't. "He cannot drive" means he has no driving skill.
- Question: "Can you play the piano?" The short answer repeats can: "Yes, I can."
- Can has no third-person -s: "She can swim", not "She cans swim".

Can: permission and requests

- Use can to ask for and give permission: "Can I use your phone?" "You can take the day off."
- The negative cannot shows that permission is refused: "You cannot park here."
- Can makes a simple, everyday request: "Can you hold the door, please?"
- Can is neutral and friendly. Could is the more polite version of the same request.

Can: possibility

- Use can for things that are generally possible: "Exercising can help you sleep better."
- Negative can't shows something is impossible: "That can't be right."
- For a specific future possibility, could is more usual: "It could rain later."
- Can and could never take to: "I can swim", not "I can to swim".

Could: the past and the polite present

- Use could for general past ability: "I could read before I started school."
- Negative: could not or couldn't. "She couldn't ride a bike until she was nine."
- Use could for polite requests: "Could you pass me the salt, please?"
- Use could for present or future possibility with uncertainty: "She could be at the office, but I am not sure."
- Could also reports past permission: "The teacher said we could leave early."

The exception: one past success takes was able to

- Could describes the ability, not the completed act: "I could run fast when I was young."
- For one successful achievement on one occasion, use was able to or managed to: "She was able to finish the race despite the rain."
- The negative couldn't works for single events too: "I couldn't finish the report yesterday."

- For other tenses, use be able to: "I will be able to help tomorrow", "I have been able to rest this week."

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. I ___ swim when I was five.

2. She ___ speak three languages fluently.

3. When I was a child, I ___ not ride a bike.

4. ___ you pass me the salt, please?

5. Yesterday she ___ finish the race despite the rain.

6. It ___ rain later, so take a coat.

7. ___ I borrow your pen?

8. She said I ___ borrow her bike.

9. I ___ hear you. The line is bad.

10. When we were children, we ___ play outside until dark.

11. He ___ run ten kilometres when he was younger.

12. Sorry, I ___ attend the meeting yesterday.

13. You ___ use my phone if you need to.

14. She ___ be at the office now, but I am not sure.

15. At that time, I ___ not understand the problem.

16. We ___ see the mountains from our hotel.

17. I ___ finish the report yesterday, so I stayed late.

18. ___ you lend me your umbrella?

19. My grandfather ___ read without glasses.

20. After the surgery, he ___ walk again.

Answer key

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1. **could** — General ability in the past takes could: I could swim.
2. **can** — Present ability takes can, and can never takes an -s: She can speak.
3. **could** — Past inability uses could not: I could not ride a bike.
4. **Could** — A polite request uses could: Could you pass me the salt?
5. **was able to** — A single past achievement takes was able to, not could.
6. **could** — A specific future possibility with uncertainty takes could.
7. **Can** — Everyday permission uses can: Can I borrow your pen?
8. **could** — Reported permission takes could: She said I could borrow her bike.
9. **cannot** — Present inability uses cannot: I cannot hear you.
10. **could** — Past permission takes could: we could play outside.
11. **could** — General past ability takes could, and the base verb follows without to.
12. **could not** — Past inability on a specific day uses could not, which works for single events.
13. **can** — Giving permission now uses can: You can use my phone.
14. **could** — Present possibility with uncertainty takes could: She could be at the office.
15. **could** — Past inability takes could not: I could not understand.
16. **could** — Past ability of perception takes could: We could see the mountains.
17. **was able to** — One completed achievement takes was able to, not could.
18. **Could** — A polite request uses could: Could you lend me your umbrella?
19. **could** — General past ability takes could: my grandfather could read.
20. **was able to** — A single successful recovery takes was able to, not could.