

## Can/could/be able

**A.** We use can to say that something is possible or that somebody has the ability to do something.

- \* We use can + infinitive (can do/can see etc.):
  - \* We can see the lake from our bedroom window.
  - \* Can you speak any foreign languages?
  - \* I can come and see you tomorrow if you like.

The negative is can't (= cannot):

- \* I'm afraid I can't come to the party on Friday.

**B.** (Be) able to ... is possible instead of can, but can is more usual:

- \* Are you able to speak any foreign languages?

But can has only two forms, can (present) and could (past). So sometimes it is necessary to use (be) able to... Compare:

- \* I can't sleep./ but I haven't been able to sleep recently. (can has no present perfect)
- \* Tom can come tomorrow.

but Tom might be able to come tomorrow. (can has no infinitive)

**C. Could and was able to...**

Sometimes could is the past of can. We use could especially with:

See/ hear/ smell/ taste/ feel /remember/ understand

- \* When we went into the house, we could smell burning.
- \* She spoke in a very low voice, but I could understand what she said.

We also use could to say that somebody had the general ability or permission to do something:

- \* My grandfather could speak five languages.
- \* We were completely free. We could do what we wanted. (= we were allowed to do ...)

We use could for general ability. But if we are talking about what happened in a particular situation, we use was/were able to... or managed to... (not could):

- \* The fire spread through the building quickly but everybody was able to escape.
- or ... everybody managed to escape. (but not 'could escape')

- \* They didn't want to come with us at first but we managed to persuade them.
- or ... we were able to persuade them. (but not 'could persuade')

Compare:

- \* Jack was an excellent tennis player. He could beat anybody. he had the general ability to beat anybody)

but

- \* Jack and Alf had a game of tennis yesterday. Alf played very well but in the end Jack managed to beat him. or ... was able to beat him. (= he managed to beat him in this particular game)

The negative couldn't (could not) is possible in all situations:

- \* My grandfather couldn't (could not) is possible in all situations
- \* We tried hard but we couldn't persuade them to come with us.
- \* Alf played well but he couldn't beat Jack.

## EXERCISES

**1. Complete the sentences using can or (be) able to. Use can if possible; otherwise use (be) able to.**

1. George has travelled a lot. He can speak four languages.
2. I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
3. Sandra --- drive but she hasn't got a car.
4. I can't understand Martin. I've never --- understand him.
5. I used to --- stand on my head but I can't do it now.
6. I can't see you on Friday but I --- meet you on Saturday morning.
7. Ask Catherine about your problem. She might --- help you.

**2. Complete the sentences with can/can't/could/couldn't + one of these verbs:**

**Come/ cat/ hear/ run /sleep /wait**

1. I'm afraid I can't come to your party next week.
2. When Tim was 16, he was a fast runner. He --- 100 meters in 11 seconds.
3. Are you in a hurry?' 'No, I've got plenty of time. I ---.'
4. I was feeling sick yesterday. I --- anything.
5. Can you speak up a bit? I --- you very well.
6. 'You look tired.' 'Yes, I --- last night,'

**3. Complete the answers to the questions with was/were able to.**

- 1 A: Did everybody escape from the fire?  
B: Yes. Although the fire spread quickly, everybody was able to escape.
- 2 A: Did you have difficulty finding Ann's house?  
B: Not really. Ann had given us good directions and we ---
3. A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?  
B: Yes. There was nobody to disturb me, so ---
4. A: Did the thief get away?  
B: Yes. No one realised what was happening and the thief ---

**4. Complete the sentences using could, couldn't or was/were able to.**

1. My grandfather was a very clever man. He could speak five languages.
2. I looked everywhere for the book but I couldn't find it.
3. They didn't want to come with us at first but we were able to persuade them.
4. Laura had hurt her leg and --- walk very well.
5. Sue wasn't at home when I phoned but I --- contact her at her office.
6. I looked very carefully and I --- see a figure in the distance.
7. I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first shop I went to didn't have any but I --- get some in the next shop.
8. My grandmother loved music. She --- play the piano very well.
9. A girl fell into the river but fortunately we --- rescue her.
10. I had forgotten to bring my camera so I --- take any photographs.

**6 Complete the sentences with could (n't) and was (n't) able to. Sometimes there is more than one answer.**

1. Eddie broke his leg last summer, so he **couldn't** swim.

2. Emily's handbag was stolen when she was out yesterday afternoon. Luckily she met a friend, so she .....use his mobile to call home.
3. I didn't enjoy the play because I forgot my glasses. I .....see the stage properly.
4. Marion's meeting was cancelled at the last moment, so she.....come to the sports club with us after all.
5. Robert .....speak any Dutch when he moved to Amsterdam last year, but he's almost fluent now.
6. I thought I'd have to get a taxi home from the party, but luckily I .....have a lift with Kate.
7. we really wanted to buy a house last year, but we just .....afford it.
8. my brother.....read well by the age of seven, but he's always had problems with maths.
9. last night we heard a noise outside our window. When we turned off the light, we.....see a deer in the garden.
10. One day last week I locked my husband out of the house by mistake, but luckily he .....get in through an open window.

## KEYS

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1.3.can                        | 2.2.could run                   | 3.2. were able to find it     |
| 1.4. been able to              | 2.3. can wait                   | 3.3. I was able to finish it. |
| 1.5. be able to                | 2.4. couldn't eat               | 3.4. was able to get away     |
| 1.6. can                       | 2.5. can't hear                 |                               |
| 1.7. be able to                | 2.6. couldn't sleep             |                               |
| 4.4.couldn't/ wasn't able to   | 5.2.was able to                 | 5.9. could                    |
| 4.5. was able to               | 5.3. couldn't or wasn't able to | 5.10. was able to             |
| 4.6.could/was able to          | 5.4. was able to                |                               |
| 4.7.was able to                | 5.5. couldn't                   |                               |
| 4.8.could/was able to          | 5.6. was able to                |                               |
| 4.9. were able to              | 5.7. couldn't or were able to   |                               |
| 4.10. couldn't/ wasn't able to | 5.8. could                      |                               |