

Modals of Ability: Can, Could, and Be Able To

INTERMEDIATE

Focus: can + infinitive, Negative: can't / cannot, Expressing possibility or allowance, General ability in the present, Present perfect (have been able to), Future forms (might/will be able to), Infinitive after modals (must be able to), Formal vs. usual usage, General past ability, Verbs of perception (see, hear, smell, etc.)

1. Present Ability and Permission

We use **can** or **be able to** to talk about ability or possibility.

- **Can:** The most common form. used for general ability, permission, or opportunity.
 - *I **can** swim.* (Ability)
 - *You **can** park here.* (Permission)
- **Be able to:** A bit more formal than *can*.
 - *I **am able to** accept your offer.*

2. Missing Forms of "Can"

The verb **can** is a modal verb. It only has two forms: **can** (present) and **could** (past). It does not have an infinitive (~~to can~~), a present perfect form (~~have canned~~), or a future form.

When we need these tenses, we **must** use **be able to**.

- **Future:** *I **will be able to** help you tomorrow.* (NOT: ~~I will can~~)
- **Present Perfect:** *I **haven't been able to** sleep lately.* (NOT: ~~I haven't canned~~)
- **Infinitive:** *I would like **to be able to** fly.* (NOT: ~~to can~~)
- **After Modals:** *You must **be able to** drive for this job.*

3. Past Ability: Could vs. Was/Were Able To

This distinction is crucial at the Intermediate level.

A. General Ability (Past)

When talking about a general skill or ability someone possessed in the past (over a long period), use **could**.

- *My grandfather **could** speak five languages.* (He had this skill generally).

B. Specific Situations (Success/Achievement)

If someone managed to do something in one specific situation (especially if it was difficult), use **was/were able to** (or *managed to*). Do **not** use *could* in affirmative sentences for specific achievements.

- *The fire was spreading fast, but everyone **was able to** escape.* (Specific success).
- ~~*Everyone **could** escape.*~~ (Incorrect).

C. Negative Past

In negative sentences (general or specific), you can use both **couldn't** or **wasn't/weren't able to**.

- *I **couldn't** find my keys.* (Specific failure - common usage).
- *I **wasn't able to** find my keys.* (Specific failure - also correct).

D. Verbs of Perception

With verbs like **see, hear, smell, taste, feel**, we normally use **could** even for specific situations.

- *I walked into the room and **could** smell gas.* (NOT: ~~was able to smell~~).

Practice Exercises

Instruction: Complete the sentences using the correct form of the verb provided. You may need to use **can**, **could**, or **be able to** combined with appropriate auxiliary verbs (will, have, etc.) depending on the tense and context.

1. I am studying hard because I want to _____ (speak) English fluently next year.
2. _____ (you/swim) when you were four years old?
3. I looked everywhere for my glasses, but I _____ (not/find) them anywhere yesterday.
4. Look at that sign! It says you _____ (park) here after 6:00 PM.
5. I'm sorry, but I _____ (not/come) to your party next Saturday. I have to work.
6. The fog was very thick, but eventually, the pilot _____ (land) the plane safely.
7. She loves music. She _____ (play) the piano and the violin beautifully.
8. We walked into the garden and we _____ (smell) the beautiful flowers immediately.
9. I _____ (not/contact) him yet because my phone is broken.
10. _____ (you/help) me with this heavy box, please?
11. My laptop crashed, so I _____ (not/finish) the report last night.
12. To work as a lifeguard, you must _____ (swim) 500 meters without stopping.
13. Even though he had a broken leg, he _____ (get) out of the car.
14. _____ (they/see) the stage clearly from the back seats last night?
15. I have been trying to fix this error for hours, but I _____ (not/solve) it so far.

Answer Key

1. **be able to speak** (Infinitive form after *want to*)
2. **Could you swim** (General past ability)
3. **couldn't find / wasn't able to find** (Past inability - negative allows both)
4. **can park / are able to park** (Permission)
5. **won't be able to come / can't come** (Future inability - *won't be able to* is more precise for future, but *can't* is often used for scheduled future arrangements)
6. **was able to land** (Specific past success/achievement - *could* is incorrect here)
7. **can play / is able to play** (General present ability)
8. **could smell** (Verb of perception in the past)
9. **haven't been able to contact** (Present Perfect)
10. **Can you help / Will you be able to help** (Request/Ability)
11. **couldn't finish / wasn't able to finish** (Past inability)
12. **be able to swim** (Infinitive after modal *must*)
13. **was able to get** (Specific past success/achievement)
14. **Could they see / Were they able to see** (Perception verb in question / Past ability)
15. **haven't been able to solve** (Present Perfect)