

Grammar Lesson CAN AND COULD

We use 'can' to talk about someone's **ability to do something**.

Positive and negative forms:

The positive - **can + base verb (infinitive without 'to')**:

She **can swim** even though she's only four.

He **can speak** seven European languages.

They **can sing** really well.

The negative - **cannot or can't + base verb (infinitive without 'to')**:

She **cannot tie** her shoelaces yet.

He **can't speak** Japanese.

They **can't whistle**.

Present, past and future:

We use **can** in the **present**:

She **can play** the guitar but she **can't read** music.

You **can paint** brilliantly.

We use **could** in the **past**:

He **could play** the piano well when he was young but he stopped practising and can only play it a little now.

She lived in Germany for five years so she **could speak** then but she's forgotten it all now.

However, if we are talking about overcoming difficulty or about doing something in a specific situation we use **was/were able to** or **managed to + base verb**:

Alice said 'I've **managed to get** somewhere to stay'.

He hadn't done much revision but somehow he **was able to pass** the exam.

There is no **future form of can**. If we want to talk about abilities in the future, we use **will be able to + base verb** (infinitive without 'to'):

After a few more lessons, I hope **I'll be able to** make a perfect chocolate cake.

If you keep practising, **you'll be able to** sing like a real professional soon.

However, we can use **can** in the future **if we are deciding now about what to do** in the future:

Can you pick up the kids after school on Friday?

A: Do you want to go to the cinema tomorrow?

B: OK. I **can buy** the tickets at lunch-time, if you like.

Conditional:

We use **could** in **conditionals** to mean **would be able to**:

She **could come** with us **if** she had a ticket.

You **could become** a manager **if** you had more sales experience.

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