MODAL VERBS: CAN, COULD, BE ABLE TO

Modal verbs can be considered as auxiliary verbs which add meaning to the sentences. Most modal verbs are invariable in their form. They are always followed by other verbs in the infinitive form.

	USES	EXAMPLES
CAN	Ability Possibility Ask for and give permission	I **can** speak four languages. **Can** you come tomorrow? **Can** I borrow a pencil? Yes, you can.
CAN'T (CANNOT)	Negative ability Negative possibility Prohibition	My friend **can't** drive. She **can't** come to your birthday party. You **can't** park here.
COULD	Past general ability Polite request (in present)	I **could** swim when I was 4. **Could** you sign here, please?
COULDN'T	For specific occasions involving inability (in past)	The rescue team **couldn't** find the hiker.
BE ABLE TO	Ability and possibility in all tenses (perfect forms, gerund, infinitive...)	I **have been able to** swim since I was five. You **will be able to** speak perfect English very soon. I would like **to be able to** fly an airplane.

BE ABLE TO

BE ABLE TO is NOT a modal auxiliary verb. We include it here for convenience, because it is often used like "can" and "could" for general ability in the past and present. But "can" and "could" can't be used in other tenses, so we must use the correct form of BE ABLE TO.

GENERAL ABILITY PRESENT SIMPLE	I **can** play the violin. √ I'**m able to** play the violin. √ She **can't** ride a horse. √ She **isn't able to** ride a horse. √
PAST SIMPLE	She **could** read before she was 5. √ She **was able to** read before she was 5. √ I **couldn't** swim when I was little. √ I **wasn't able to** swim when I was little. √
OTHER TENSES	How long **have you been able to** speak English? I want **to be able to** speak English fluently. I hate **not being able to** communicate with people when I am in England.

When we talk about specific occasions in the past, we can only use WAS/WERE ABLE TO for positive sentences. For negative sentences we can use WASN'T/WEREN'T ABLE TO and COULDN'T. Look at these examples:

SPECIFIC OCCASION positive	The rescue team ~~could~~ find the hiker. ×	The rescue team **were able to** find the hiker. √
negative	The rescue team **couldn't** find the hiker. √	The rescue team **weren't able to** find the hiker. √

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Now do the following exercises.

1/ Put the sentences in the correct order.

1. like / I / late / Sundays. / to / being / able / sleep / on

2. couldn't / year. / us / William / last / visit

3. I've / eight. / I / was / been / to / ski / able / since

4. You'll / to / your / in / able / Mexico. / be / practice / Spanish

5. very / French / well. / speak / Julia / can't

6. please? / window, / you / close / Could / the

2/ Write the correct answer. Some sentences are in negative.

1. Jenny play the piano since she was five.
2. George count to a hundred by the age of ten.
3. I sleep last night because it was too hot.
4. I'd love play the violin, but I don't have time to practise.
5. My grandfather has retired so now he spend more time in the garden.
6. We buy a new car this year because we don't have enough money.

3/ Put in *can, can't, could, couldn't*. If none is possible, use *be able to* in the correct tense:

1. _____ you swim when you were 10?

2. We _____ get to the meeting on time yesterday because the train was delayed by one hour.

3. He _____ arrive at the party on time, even after missing the train, so he was very pleased.

4. He's amazing, he _____ speak 5 languages including Chinese.

5. I _____ drive a car until I was 34, then I moved to the countryside so I had to learn.

6. I looked everywhere for my glasses but I _____ find them anywhere.

7. I searched for your house for ages, luckily I _____ find it in the end.

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8. She's 7 years old but she _____ read yet – her parents are getting her extra lessons.

9. I read the book three times but I _____ understand it.

10. James _____ speak Japanese when he lived in Japan, but he's forgotten most of it now.

11. I _____ speak Arabic since my trip to Libya in 2010.

12. I would like to _____ repair this computer myself and save some money.

13. My grandmother _____ use a computer until last month. Since then, she's been taking lessons at the library.

14. John likes _____ lay in bed on Sunday mornings.

15. When the car broke down I was really pleased because I _____ solve the problem.

4/ The following sentences talk about general ability and ability in specific occasions. Tick the sentences that are right and correct and the wrong ones.

1. I could repair the water tap myself. ✗ I was able to repair the water tap myself.
2. We couldn't get to the station on time and we missed the bus. √
3. My grandfather could paint really well.
4. We couldn't understand why he didn't accept the offer.
5. It was hard but in the end I could unlock the suitcase.
6. I ran faster than my opponents and I could win the race.
7. When I was a child I could play the recorder, now I can't.
8. I could see the sea from my hotel room.
9. I couldn't find the chairs that I liked in the furniture shop.
10. I was able to buy a guitar with the money I had earned.

LIVEWORKSHEETS