

Ability: can, can't, could, couldn't

1 We form sentences with can like this:

can + INFINITIVE

I can ski.

POSITIVE

I/He/She/It/We/You/They can ski.

NEGATIVE

FULL FORM SHORT FORM

I/He/She/It/You (etc.) cannot ski. can't ski.

QUESTIONS

Can I/he/she/it/you (etc.) ski?

In spoken English cannot is possible, but we normally use can't:

He can't swim.

For short answers (*Can you swim? ~ No, I can't*), see Unit 37.

2 We use can and can't to talk about things we are able to do generally.

She can speak Japanese. (= She is able to speak Japanese.)

He can't ski. (= He isn't able to ski.)

We also use can and can't to talk about things we are able to do at the moment:

I can see the moon. (= I am able to see it now.)

3 We form sentences with could like this:

could + INFINITIVE

I could swim.

POSITIVE

I/he/she/it/we/you/they could ski.

NEGATIVE

FULL FORM SHORT FORM

I/he/you (etc.) could not ski couldn't ski.

We use could to talk about things we were able to do generally in the past:



I could run 100 metres in 12 seconds when I was young.

Susan could read when she was three years old.

4 We do not normally use could for something that happened on a particular occasion in the past. We use was able to or managed to:

The boat was in difficulties, but in the end it managed to reach the port. (OR... it was able to reach...; NOT ... it could reach...)

5 When we talk about a person's ability to do something in the future, we use will be able to.

The baby will be able to talk soon.

Practice

A Complete the sentences with can, can't or couldn't and the verbs in brackets ().

► You don't have to shout. I can hear (hear) you very well.

► I couldn't watch (watch) that programme last night because I had to go out.

1 He (play) last week because he was injured.

2 He eats in restaurants all the time because he (cook).

3 I (give) you a lift in my car because it isn't working at the moment.

4 I didn't have a good seat in the theatre, so I (see) the stage very well.

5 John doesn't need a calculator. He (do) very difficult sums in his head.

6 She's very good at music. She (play) three instruments.

7 I (find) my address book. Have you seen it?

8 He spoke very quickly and I (understand) anything he said.

9 We (go) on the trip because we (afford) it. It was very expensive.

10 I (do) any more work because I was very tired, so I stopped.

11 I'm afraid that I (talk) to you now. I'm in a hurry. I have to be at work in five minutes.

B Use the words in brackets () to complete each sentence, with *can*, *can't*, *could* or *couldn't*.

► Sarah phoned Jane yesterday. (They/not/talk/for a long time, because Jane had to go out.)
They couldn't talk for a long time, because Jane had to go out.

1 Grandma needs her glasses. (She/not/see/anything without her glasses.)

She

2 Mary won her race. (She was so tired after the race that she/not/stand up.)

She

3 (Last year, Robert/beat/his younger brother at chess.) But he can't beat him now.

Last year,

4 John and Anna have a wonderful view from their hotel room. (They/see/the whole of the city.)

They

C Complete these sentences using *managed to* or the correct form of *be able to*.

► I *was able to/managed to...* get the last ticket for the concert.

1 After waiting for a long time, we go into the museum.

2 They buy a new carpet yesterday.

3 I eat three plates of pasta in the restaurant last night!

4 Our friends visit us tomorrow afternoon.

5 She have a long holiday next year.

6 We ski in Scotland last weekend.

D Look at this table and complete the sentences using *can*, *could*, or *will be able to*.

	LAST YEAR	NOW	HOPES FOR THE FUTURE
Joy	swim 100 metres	swim 1000 metres	swim for her club team
Mark	type 15 words per minute	type 30 words per minute	work as a secretary
Anne	speak only a little French	speak French quite well	work as an interpreter
Carol	only cook omelettes	cook quite well	work as a chef
Tom	only play the piano	play the piano and the violin	be a professional musician
Susan	ride a bike	drive a car	drive a racing car

► Last year Joy *could swim 100 metres*.... Now, *she can swim 1000 metres*.

► At the moment Anne *can speak French*..... quite well, and if she studies hard, perhaps *she'll be able to work*..... as an interpreter.

1 Last year Mark Now,

2 Last year Anne Now,

3 At the moment Carol , and if she works hard, perhaps

4 Last year Tom Now, , and if he studies hard, perhaps

5 Last year Susan Now, , and she hopes that one day