

63 can, could, may



1 Asking for permission

	ASKING FOR PERMISSION	GIVING PERMISSION	REFUSING PERMISSION
informal	<i>Can I use your pen?</i>	<i>Yes, you can.</i> <i>Yes, of course (you can).</i> <i>Yes, sure.</i>	<i>No, you can't.</i> <i>No, I'm sorry.</i>
formal/ polite	<i>Could I use your bathroom?</i> <i>May I make a suggestion?</i>	<i>Yes, you can/may.</i> <i>Yes, of course/certainly.</i>	<i>No, you can't/may not.</i> <i>No, I'm sorry/I'm afraid not.</i>

We use *can I/we* to ask for permission to do something:

'Can I have a shower here?' *'No, I'm sorry, you can't! It's for women.'*

'Dad, can we borrow the car this evening?' *'Yes, you can. I don't need it.'*

If we want to be very polite or formal, we use *could* or *may*:

'Could I use your bathroom, please?' *'Of course you can. It's over there.'*

'May I make a suggestion?' *'Certainly.'*

NATURAL ENGLISH We only use *may* or *may not* in written instructions or very formal situations:

Students may not take bags into the exam.

You may start writing now.

2 Making a request

	MAKING A REQUEST	REPLYING
informal	<i>Can you lend me some money?</i>	<i>Sure, how much do you need?</i> <i>No, I'm sorry. I don't have enough.</i>
formal/ polite	<i>Could you pass me the salt?</i>	<i>Yes, of course.</i> <i>Certainly.</i>

We use *can you* to make a request in an informal way:

'Can you help me with these bags?' *'Yes, of course.'*

'Can you tell Tom I called?' *'Yes, sure.'*

If we want to be more polite or formal, we use *could*:

'Could you pass me the water, please?' *'Yes, here you are.'*

NATURAL ENGLISH We use *please* with *can* or *could* to ask for something or make a request in a polite way:

'Please could you be quiet?'

or *'Could you be quiet, please?'*

Practice

1 Match the questions 1–5 with the answers A–F.

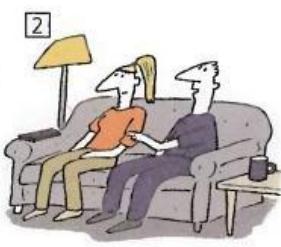
- 0 Can I use your phone, please?
I haven't got my mobile.
- 1 Please may I leave the room for a few minutes?
- 2 Can we go to the cinema this evening?
- 3 Could I ask you for some advice?
- 4 Could we leave our bags here?
- 5 Can I take photos?

- A No, you may not leave during the examination.
- B Yes, of course you can. I'll try to help.
- C Yes, you can leave them at reception.
- D Yes, of course. It's on the table.
- E No, you can't use cameras in the museum.
- F Yes, you can, but be back by 10.30.

2 Write a request for each picture. Use the words under the pictures and *can* or *could*.



open the window



turn the TV on



close the door



take a photo of us

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

3 Choose the correct words in *italics*.

- 0 Wife to husband: Adam, *can* / *may* I use your laptop computer this weekend?
- 1 Notice in library: Students *can* / *may* borrow DVDs from the library.
- 2 Woman in café: *Could I* / *Could I to* sit over there?
- 3 Two colleagues: 'Could I use your desk tomorrow?' 'Yes, of course you *could* / *can*.'
- 4 Two friends: '*Can you* / *may you* lend me five pounds?' 'Sure.'
- 5 Notice in train: Passengers *can't* / *may not* open the doors while the train is moving.

4 GRAMMAR IN USE Complete the conversation about people doing a race.

Use words from the box.

can Can I Can we can't Could you you can

A OK. Are there any questions?

B Yes, my friends and I are in different groups. (0) ... *Can we* run together, please?

A No, I'm afraid you (1) You're in different groups because you run at different speeds.

C (2) stop while I'm running – to buy a drink or something?

A Ah, no. I'm afraid not. The rules say (3) only have drinks that the organisers provide. There will be tables at the side of the road with drinks on – you (4) take as many of those as you want.

D (5) give us a copy of the rules, please?

A Yes, of course. Here you are.