

63 can, could, may



1 Asking for permission

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

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

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?**'

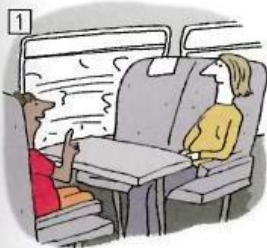
or 'Could you be quiet, **please?**'

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. | A No, you may not leave during the examination. |
| 1 Please may I leave the room for a few minutes? | B Yes, of course you can. I'll try to help. |
| 2 Can we go to the cinema this evening? | C Yes, you can leave them at reception. |
| 3 Could I ask you for some advice? | D Yes, of course. It's on the table. |
| 4 Could we leave our bags here? | E No, you can't use cameras in the museum. |
| 5 Can I take photos? | 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.