

4B

GRAMMAR BANK

ability and possibility: *can, could, be able to*
can / could



Our daughter could play the violin when she was three.

I can speak three languages fluently. 4.13
Jenny can't come tonight. She's sick.
Our daughter could play the violin when she was three.
They couldn't wait because they were in a hurry.
Could you open the door for me, please?

- *can* is a modal verb. It only has a present form (which can be used with future meaning) and a past or conditional form (*could*).
- For all other tenses and forms, we use *be able to* + base form.

be able to + base form

- 1 Luke has been able to swim since he was three. 4.14
I'd like to be able to ski.
I love being able to stay in bed late on Sunday morning.
You'll be able to practice your English in the US.
- 2 Fortunately, I am able to accept your invitation.
My colleagues weren't able to come to yesterday's meeting.

- 1 We use *be able to* + base form for ability and possibility, especially where there is no form of *can*, e.g., present perfect, infinitive, gerund, future, etc.
- 2 We sometimes use *be able to* in the present and past (instead of *can / could*), usually if we want to be more formal.

a Circle the correct form. Check (✓) if both are possible.

I've always wanted to can / be able to salsa dance.

- 1 My little boy *couldn't* / *wasn't able to* speak until he was almost two years old.
- 2 She's much better after her operation. She'll *can* / *be able to* walk again soon.
- 3 He hasn't *could* / *been able to* fix my bike yet. He'll do it tomorrow.
- 4 It's the weekend at last! I love *can* / *being able to* go out with my friends.
- 5 When we lived on the coast, we used to *can* / *be able to* go to the beach every day.
- 6 I *can't* / *'m not able to* send any emails right now. My computer isn't working.
- 7 I *could* / *was able to* read before I started school.
- 8 We won't *can* / *be able to* go on vacation this year because we need a new car.
- 9 Linda's happy because she's finally *could* / *been able to* find a part-time job.
- 10 Alex *can* / *is able to* speak Korean fluently after living in Seoul for ten years.

b Complete with the correct form of *be able to* (+, -, or ?).



I've never *been able to* scuba dive.

- 1 Her cell phone has been turned off all morning, so I _____ talk to her yet.
- 2 I don't like noisy restaurants. I like _____ have a conversation without shouting.
- 3 I _____ leave home when I get a job.
- 4 We're having a party next Saturday. _____ you _____ come?
- 5 You need _____ swim before you can go in a canoe.
- 6 I can speak five languages. I hate _____ communicate with people in their own language.
- 7 Fortunately, firefighters _____ rescue everybody from the burning house.
- 8 I'm very sorry, but we _____ come to your wedding next month. We'll be on vacation.
- 9 You're looking worse. _____ you _____ contact the doctor yet?
- 10 The manager _____ see you right now because she's in a meeting.