

Unit
26

can, could and (be) able to

A We use **can** to say that something is possible or allowed, or that somebody has the ability to do something. We use **can** + *infinitive* (**can do** / **can see** etc.):

- ☐ We **can see** the lake from our hotel.
- ☐ 'I don't have a pen.' 'You **can use** mine.'
- ☐ **Can** you **speak** any foreign languages?
- ☐ I **can come** and see you tomorrow if you like.
- ☐ The word 'dream' **can be** a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't** (= **cannot**):

- ☐ I'm afraid I **can't come** to the party on Friday.

B You can say that somebody **is able to** do something, but **can** is more usual:

- ☐ We **are able to see** the lake from our hotel.

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (*present*) and **could** (*past*). So sometimes it is necessary to use **(be) able to**. Compare:

- ☐ I **can't** sleep.
- ☐ Tom **can** come tomorrow.
- ☐ Maria **can** speak French, Spanish and English.

- ☐ I **haven't been able to** sleep recently.
- ☐ Tom **might be able to** come tomorrow.
- ☐ Applicants for the job **must be able to** speak two foreign languages.

C Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

- ☐ We had a lovely room in the hotel. We **could see** the lake.
- ☐ As soon as I walked into the room, I **could smell** gas.
- ☐ I was sitting at the back of the theatre and **couldn't hear** very well.

We also use **could** to say that somebody had the ability to do something, or was allowed to do something:

- ☐ My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- ☐ We were totally free. We **could do** what we wanted. (= we were allowed to do)

D **could** and **was able to**

We use **could** for *general* ability and with **see, hear** etc. :

- ☐ My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- ☐ I **could see** them, but not very clearly.

But to say that somebody succeeded in doing something in a specific situation, we normally use **was/were able to** or **managed to** (*not could*):

- ☐ The fire spread quickly, but everybody **was able to escape**. (*not could escape*)
- ☐ I didn't know where Max was, but I **managed to find** him in the end. (*not could find*)

Compare:

- ☐ Jack was an excellent tennis player when he was younger. He **could beat** anybody.
(= he was good enough to beat anybody, he had the ability)

but Jack and Andy played a match yesterday. Andy played well, but Jack **managed to beat** him.
(= he succeeded in beating him this time)

The negative **couldn't** (**could not**) is possible in all situations:

- ☐ My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- ☐ I looked for Max everywhere, but I **couldn't find** him.
- ☐ Andy played well, but he **couldn't beat** Jack.

Exercises

26.1 Complete the sentences using *can* or *(be) able to*. If *can* is not possible, use *(be) able to*.

- 1 Gary has travelled a lot. He can speak five languages.
- 2 I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
- 3 Nicole drive, but she doesn't have a car.
- 4 I used to stand on my head, but I can't do it any more.
- 5 I can't understand Mark. I've never understand him.
- 6 I can't see you on Friday, but I meet you on Saturday morning.
- 7 Ask Katherine about your problem. She might help you.
- 8 You have to be careful in this part of the city. It be dangerous.
- 9 Michael has lived in Italy a long time, so he should speak Italian.

26.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in brackets.

- 1 (something you used to be able to do)
I used to be able to sing well.
- 2 (something you used to be able to do)
I used
- 3 (something you would like to be able to do)
I'd
- 4 (something you have never been able to do)
I've

26.3 Complete the sentences with *can/can't/could/couldn't* + the following:

believe come hear run sleep wait

- 1 I'm afraid I can't come to your party next week.
- 2 When Dan was 16, he 100 metres in 11 seconds.
- 3 'Are you in a hurry?' 'No, I've got plenty of time. I
- 4 I don't feel good this morning. I last night.
- 5 Can you speak a little louder? I you very well.
- 6 I was amazed when I heard the news. I it.

26.4 Complete the answers to the questions with *was/were able to* ...

- 1 A: Did everybody escape from the fire?
B: Yes. The fire spread quickly, but everybody was able to escape.
- 2 A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes, there was nobody to disturb me, so I
- 3 A: Did you solve the problem?
B: Yes, we did. It wasn't easy, but we
- 4 A: Did the thief get away?
B: Yes. No-one realised what was happening and the thief

26.5 Complete the sentences using *could*, *couldn't* or *managed to*.

- 1 My grandfather travelled a lot. He could speak five languages.
- 2 I looked everywhere for the book, but I couldn't find it.
- 3 They didn't want to come with us at first, but we managed to persuade them.
- 4 Jessica had hurt her foot and walk very well.
- 5 There was a small fire in the kitchen, but fortunately I put it out.
- 6 The walls were thin and I hear people talking in the next room.
- 7 I ran my first marathon recently. It was very hard, but I finish.
- 8 My grandmother loved music. She play the piano very well.
- 9 We wanted to go to the concert, but we get tickets.
- 10 A girl fell into the river, but some people pull her out. She's all right now.

Unit
27**could (do) and could have (done)****A**

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can** (see Unit 26):

- ☐ Listen. I **can hear** something. (*now*)
- ☐ I listened. I **could hear** something. (*past*)

But **could** is not always past. We also use **could** for possible actions now or in the future, especially to make suggestions. For example:

- ☐ A: What shall we do tonight?
B: We **could go** to the cinema.
- ☐ A: When you go to Paris next month,
you **could stay** with Sarah.
B: Yes, I suppose I **could**.

Can is also possible in these sentences ('We can go to the cinema' etc.). **Could** is less sure than **can**.

**B**

We also use **could (not can)** for actions that are not realistic. For example:

- ☐ I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*not I can sleep for a week*)

Compare **can** and **could**:

- ☐ I **can stay** with Sarah when I go to Paris. (*realistic*)
- ☐ Maybe I **could stay** with Sarah when I go to Paris. (*possible, but less sure*)
- ☐ This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here for ever. (*unrealistic*)

C

We also use **could (not can)** to say that something is possible now or in the future:

- ☐ The story **could be** true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)
- ☐ I don't know what time Lisa is coming. She **could get** here at any time.

Compare **can** and **could**:

- ☐ The weather **can** change very quickly in the mountains. (*in general*)
- ☐ The weather is nice now, but it **could** change later. (*the weather now, not in general*)

D

We use **could have (done)** to talk about the past. Compare:

- ☐ I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*now*)
I was so tired, I **could have slept** for a week. (*past*)
- ☐ The situation is bad, but it **could be** worse. (*now*)
The situation was bad, but it **could have been** worse. (*past*)

Something **could have** happened = it was possible, but did *not* happen:

- ☐ Why did you stay at a hotel? You **could have stayed** with me.
- ☐ David was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's all right.

E

I **couldn't do** something = it would not be possible:

- ☐ I **couldn't live** in a big city. I'd hate it. (= it wouldn't be possible for me)
- ☐ Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't be** better.

For the past we use **couldn't have** ... (= would not have been possible):

- ☐ We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.

Note that 'I **couldn't do** something' has two meanings:

- (1) I **couldn't** = it would not be possible now, I would not be able:
☐ I **couldn't run** ten kilometres now. I'm not fit enough. (= I would not be able)
- (2) I **couldn't** = I was not able (past)
☐ I **couldn't run** yesterday because I'd hurt my leg. (= I was not able)

Exercises

27.1 Which goes with which?

- 1 What shall we eat tonight?
- 2 I need to phone Vicky sometime.
- 3 What shall I get Ann for her birthday?
- 4 Where shall we put this picture?
- 5 What would you like to do at the weekend?
- 6 I don't know what to wear to the wedding.

- a We could go away somewhere.
- b You could give her a book.
- c ~~We could have fish.~~
- d You could wear your brown suit.
- e You could do it now.
- f We could hang it in the kitchen.

- 1 c
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

27.2 Put in **can** or **could**.

- 1 This is a wonderful place. I could stay here forever.
- 2 I'm so angry with him. I _____ kill him!
- 3 I _____ hear a strange noise. What is it?
- 4 It's so nice here. I _____ sit here all day but unfortunately I have to go.
- 5 I _____ understand your point of view, but I don't agree with you.
- 6 Peter is a keen musician. He plays the flute and he _____ also play the piano.
- 7 The company Amy works for isn't doing well. She _____ lose her job.
- 8 Some people are unlucky. Life _____ be very unfair.
- 9 I've been really stupid. I _____ kick myself.
- 10 Be careful climbing that tree. You _____ fall.

27.3 Complete the sentences. Choose from:

gone
have moved

could be
could have

could come
could have come

could sleep
could have been

- 1 A: Are you tired?
B: Yes, very tired. I feel as if I could sleep for a week.
- 2 A: I spent a very boring evening at home yesterday.
B: Why did you stay at home? You _____ out with us.
- 3 A: Shall I open this letter?
B: Yes. It _____ important.
- 4 A: How was your exam? Was it difficult?
B: It wasn't so bad. It _____ worse.
- 5 A: I got very wet walking home in the rain.
B: Why did you walk? You _____ taken a taxi.
- 6 A: Where shall we meet tomorrow?
B: Well, I _____ to your office if you like.
- 7 A: Does Tom still live in the same place?
B: I'm not sure. He could _____.
- 8 A: Did you go to university?
B: No. I could have _____, but I didn't want to.

27.4 Complete the sentences. Use **couldn't** or **couldn't have** + these verbs (in the correct form):

afford be be live manage stand study wear

- 1 I couldn't live in a big city. I'd hate it.
- 2 We had a really good holiday. It couldn't have been better.
- 3 I _____ that hat. People would laugh at me.
- 4 You helped me a lot. I _____ without you.
- 5 The staff at the hotel were really good. They _____ more helpful.
- 6 There's no way we could buy a car now. We _____ it.
- 7 Jack prepared for the exam as well as he could. He _____ harder.
- 8 I wouldn't like to live near the motorway. I _____ the noise of the traffic.