

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.