

CAN / COULD

There are some verbs in English that belong to a special category known as MODALS. They do not take the "s" in the simple present third person singular, do not take the "ed" in the past simple and cannot have an "ing" ending for continuous tenses. They have a meaning of their own and in this particular lesson, we will start with the verb CAN.

Modals usually behave like auxiliary verbs, but they carry a very specific meaning. In the case of CAN, its most common meaning is ABILITY.

Other modal verbs		
<i>shall</i>	<i>can</i>	<i>ought to</i>
<i>should</i>	<i>could</i>	<i>have to</i>
<i>will</i>	<i>may</i>	<i>would like to</i>
<i>would</i>	<i>might</i>	would prefer to
	<i>must</i>	would rather

Examples of sentences without auxiliary verbs	With the MODAL verb CAN
I talk on the telephone	I can talk on the telephone
He walks home	He can walk home
The man cuts wood	The man can cut wood.
The dog barks	The dog can bark

Forms of can / could

Affirmative statements: We use **CAN** for all persons in the present and future, and **COULD** for the past tense.

Negative statements : We use cannot (can't), could not (couldn't). Example: She cannot swim. They could not come.

Interrogative sentences: Can I borrow your pen? Could you register in the Japanese course?

Uses of can /could

To express **ABILITY**:

I can drive a car.
I cannot (can't) write a book.
I could sing if I knew the song.
I could not (couldn't) use the computer.

To express **POSSIBILITY**: You can ski on the mountain (there is enough snow).

CAN / COULD

You cannot (can't) bathe in the sea (there are sharks)

She could go to Boston if she had time.

They could not (couldn't) eat the dessert.

To express PERMISSION:

You can go to the beach.

The teacher told me I could go home.

You cannot (can't) leave until six.

Could you drive the bus?

NOTE. The verb "could" can also be used in the present tense when we want to express a polite request for permission. In this case, COULD does NOT express past but present. Look at these two examples:

1) **Can I talk to you later?** (the speaker is expressing an informal request. S/he probably knows the listener well and there is a certain degree of familiarity between them).

2) **Could I talk to you later?** (the speaker is expressing a more polite request. The two people do NOT probably know each other very well and there is a degree of formality in the situation).

Exercise:

Fill in the blanks of the following sentences with CAN or COULD. Write your answers on a piece of paper and check them with the answer key at the end.

1. Poodles _____ be excellent pets. (possibility)
2. You _____ go to the beach tomorrow if you want to. (permission)
3. _____ I borrow your brush? (informal request)
4. _____ you come home early? (polite request)
5. When _____ you come? (possibility)
6. She _____ walk home. (ability)
7. He _____ (not) come tomorrow. (possibility)
8. They _____ not throw the ball. (physical ability)
9. They _____ drink a lot of wine when they were in France last year. (possibility)
10. I _____ be a good student if I work hard. (possibility)