Can and Could

30 examples · 10 practice questions · explained answers

Using can

1. She can speak three languages.
2. Can you come to the meeting tomorrow?
3. I can finish the project by Monday.
4. Can you hear the music from your room?
5. He can solve this math problem easily.
6. You can use my computer if you need to.
7. Can they see us from here?
8. We can leave as soon as you are ready.
9. Can you believe how fast he runs?
10. This plant can grow up to two meters tall.
11. Can I ask you a question?
12. Birds can fly long distances.
13. Can you tell me the time?
14. She can read without her glasses.
15. Can I have some water, please?

Using could

1. When I was a child, I could play outside all day.
2. Could you pass the salt, please?
3. She said she could help us with the project.
4. I could see the mountains from my window.
5. Could you lend me your book?
6. We could go to the beach this weekend.
7. He could be the next president.
8. Could it be true?
9. When we were kids, we could ride our bikes everywhere.
10. I could use a break right now.
11. Could I use your phone?
12. If we hurry, we could catch the train.
13. I could swim faster when I was younger.
14. Could you give me a moment?
15. He could have been a great artist.

Can commonly describes current ability and general possibility. Could can describe past ability, a tentative request or a possible situation; it does not always refer to the past.

Practice questions

Choose can or could. Some requests and offers allow both; where that happens, explain the difference in tone.

1. ____ you help me with this box? (Can/Could)

2. When I was young, I ____ run very fast. (can/could)

3. ____ I borrow your car tonight? (Can/Could)

4. Describe her current ability: she ____ speak Japanese fluently now. (can/could)

5. If I had more time, I ____ finish the project. (can/could)

6. ____ you tell me where the nearest bank is? (Can/Could)

7. He ____ play the piano when he was five. (can/could)

8. We are unsure why he has not replied. He ____ have forgotten our meeting. (can/could)

9. They ____ be at home right now. (can/could)

10. ____ I get you anything else? (Can/Could)

Complete the questions before checking the answer key on the next page.

Answers and explanations

1. Can or could. Both can make a request; could is usually less direct.

2. Could. The sentence describes general ability in the past.

3. Can or could. Both ask permission; could is usually more tentative.

4. Can. The instruction asks about her current ability.

5. Could. The result belongs to an unreal present condition.

6. Can or could. Both can ask for help; could is usually less direct.

7. Could. The ability is placed at age five.

8. Could. Could have forgotten expresses a possible past explanation.

9. Could. This is a specific possibility about their location now.

10. Can or could. Both can offer help; can is the usual direct offer.

Two useful distinctions

For one completed success, was able to or managed to is usually clearer: “Despite the faulty keypad, Deniz managed to open the door.” Could is natural for general past ability and with perception verbs: “Through the gap, Deniz could see the key.”

When granting permission now, “Could I use this desk?” normally receives “Yes, you can” or “Of course”. The modal in the answer does not have to match the question.

More practice: globalenglishtest.com/can-could-exercises/