

57 Ability

"Can" is a modal verb that describes what someone is able to do. It is used in different forms to describe past and present abilities.

See also:
Present simple **1**
Future with "will" **18**

57.1 "CAN / CANNOT / CAN'T"

"Can" goes between the subject and the main verb.
The verb after "can" goes in its base form.

I **can** ride a bicycle.



"Can" is always the same. It doesn't change with the subject.

He **can** play the guitar.



Base form of verb.

The negative form of "can" is "cannot" or "can't."

I { **cannot**
can't } sing jazz songs.

The more common, short form of "cannot."



TIP

The long negative form "cannot" is always spelled as one word, not two words.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Janet **can** play tennis.



He **cannot** climb the tree.



Bob **can** swim well.



They **can't** lift the box.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

I / You / He / She
It / We / They

"CAN / CANNOT / CAN'T"

can
cannot
can't

BASE FORM

ride

OBJECT

a bicycle.

57.2 "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

"Could" is the past form of "can" and is used to talk about an ability in the past. "When" plus a time setting can be used to say when someone had the ability.



The time frame can be set with a phrase about an age, day, or year.

I **can't** climb trees now, but I **could** when I was younger.

Describes a present ability.

Describes a past ability.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

When I was a student, I **could** study all night before an exam.



When Milo was eight, he **could** play the violin.



Negative form.

I **couldn't** go to China last year because it was too expensive.



Last year she **couldn't** run very far, but yesterday she ran a marathon.



57.3 "CAN" IN THE FUTURE

It is not grammatically possible to talk about the future using "can." "Will be able to" is used instead.

At the moment, I **can** play the trombone quite well.



If I work harder, I **will be able to** play at concerts.

"Will can" is incorrect.

The negative is formed with "not able to" or "unable to."

Unfortunately, I **can't** read music very well.



If I don't learn, **I won't be able** to join the orchestra.
will be unable

"Will be unable to" can also be used, but it's less common.