

58 Permission, requests, and offers

"Can," "could," and "may" are used to ask permission to do something, or to ask someone to do something for you. They can also be used to offer to help someone.

See also:
Types of verbs 49
Modal verbs 56

58.1 ASKING PERMISSION AND MAKING REQUESTS

"Can" is the most common modal verb used to ask permission or to make a request.

Can I have some popcorn?



Yes, you can.

Informal answers use "can" as well.

"Could" replaces "can" for more formal situations, such as in business or to talk to strangers.

Excuse me, could I sit here, please?



I'm sorry, but that seat is taken.

Negative answers can be more polite by adding "I'm sorry" or "I'm afraid."

"Please" is used in polite requests.

"May" can also be used in formal situations.

May I make an appointment?



Of course.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Can I borrow your pen?



Can I have this in a smaller size?



Excuse me, could you open the door for me?



May I reserve a table for 7pm?



58.2 MAKING OFFERS

"Can" and "may" can also be used to offer to do something for someone.

Can I help you carry those?



Yes, please.

"May" is only used for formal situations.

May I take your coat?



Yes, thank you.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Can I get you a drink?



That would be lovely.

My computer's broken again!



Can I help at all?

Good evening. May I take your order?



Yes, please.

Which way is the elevator?



It's on the left. May I help you with your bags?

58.3 SHALL FOR OFFERS AND SUGGESTIONS

"Shall" is used to find out if someone thinks a certain suggestion is a good idea. This is not often used in US English.

That bag looks heavy. Shall I carry it for you?



Yes, please.

Shall I open the window?



Good idea. It's far too hot in here.