

Can and Could

A modal auxiliary verb is used to modify the mood of a verb. Here is a list of the modal auxiliary verbs:

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|-----------|-----------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------------|---------|
| Can-Could | May-Might | Shall-Should | Will-Would | Must-Have to | Ought to-Had better | Used to |
|-----------|-----------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------------|---------|

Can: “Can” is used to express ability, willingness, permission, or possibility. The negative of can is “cannot” or the contraction “can’t”.

Example: I can cook dinner.

In this example “**can**” expresses the *ability* to cook dinner.

Example: Can you pass me the ketchup?

In this example “**Can**” expresses the *willingness* pass me the ketchup.

Example: Can I use your pencil?

In this example “**Can**” expresses the *permission* to use your pencil.

Example: Intense light can hurt your eyes.

In this example “**can**” expresses the *possibility* of intense light to hurt your eyes.

Directions: Say how “**can**” is used in each sentence. Circle “**A**” if it is used to express ability, “**W**” if it is used to express willingness, “**Per**” if it is used to express permission and “**Pos**” if it is used to express possibility.

- 1) I can tie my shoes. **A** **W** **Per** **Pos**
- 2) Can I have a piece of gum? **A** **W** **Per** **Pos**
- 3) If you ride a motorcycle, you can fall. **A** **W** **Per** **Pos**
- 4) Can you get me a drink of water? **A** **W** **Per** **Pos**
- 5) I can speak English well. **A** **W** **Per** **Pos**

- 6) He can use my basketball if he wants to. **A W Per Pos**
- 7) Can they clean my car while I am at work? **A W Per Pos**
- 8) Can squirrels fly? **A W Per Pos**
- 9) It can snow if it gets very cold. **A W Per Pos**
- 10) I can help you with your homework if you like. **A W Per Pos**

Directions: Now make your own sentences using “can”.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

Could: “**Could**” has at least three functions. First, it can replace “can” and give the phrase a more conditional tone. Second, it can function as a the past tense of “can”. Third, it can function in the same way as “might” or “may”, suggesting that something is a possibility. The negative of can is “**could not**” or the contraction “**couldn’t**”.

Example: You could have been an astronaut if you wanted to.

In this example “**could**” expresses the conditional ability to be an astronaut in the past.

Example: He couldn’t let me have his pencil because he needed it.

In this example “**couldn’t**” expresses the lack of permission to have his pencil in the past.

Example: Jane could be at the store right now.

In this example “**could**” expresses the possibility that Jane is at the store in the present. “**Could**” functions the same way as “might” or “may” in this sentence.

Directions: Circle the correct auxiliary modal verb in each sentence.

Example: I (can, could) jump very high in college.

- 1) I (could, can) help you with your homework now.
- 2) Five years ago, I (cannot, couldn’t) play the piano.
- 3) I (can, could) get an A on the test.

- 4) I (can, could) run ten miles if I train hard enough.
- 5) We (can, could) speak English well.
- 6) Matt (could, can) be sick today.
- 7) The volleyball team (can, could) go to the Olympics this year if they are lucky.
- 8) I think I (can, could) help you learn math if you promise to study hard.
- 9) (Can, Could) we go to the zoo tomorrow?
- 10) I (cannot, couldn't) run that fast when I was six years old.

Directions: Now make your own sentences using “**could**”.

1) _____

2) _____