



MODAL VERBS 1 - ABILITY



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Expemo code:
14Z9-7168-11EU



1

Modal verbs for ability

We use **can**, **could**, **be able to** and **managed to** (+ *infinitive without 'to'*) to say that somebody is able to do something.

	Use	Examples
can / can't	to say that somebody has the ability to do something in the present or future	I can speak English. Can you speak Japanese? I'm sorry, I can't come to your party tonight.
be able to	to say that somebody has the ability to do something <i>NOTE: can is more usual than be able to in the present. However, can only has a present and past form (could), so sometimes it is necessary to use be able to, for example in the present perfect or infinitive.</i>	Are you able to speak any foreign languages? I'm not able to come to the meeting tomorrow. I haven't been able to sleep lately. (<i>present perfect</i>) He would like to be able to sing . (<i>infinitive</i>)



	Use	Examples
could/ couldn't	to say that somebody had the general ability to do something in the past. General ability means something that you can do any time you want after learning it, for example reading, swimming, etc. We often use could + see, hear, smell, taste, feel, remember, understand	My cousin could play the piano when she was five. My grandfather couldn't swim . I couldn't hear what she was saying. I could smell a fire.
was able to couldn't managed to	to say that somebody had the ability to do something in a specific situation , for example win a match, escape from a dangerous situation, lift something, etc.	We were able to win the match. I wasn't able to open the door. She couldn't find you at the party. Did she manage to find you?

Dialogue

A: Can you speak Japanese?

B: I could speak it a few years ago. But since then, I haven't been able to find a new teacher.

2

Practice 1 - Can/can't or be able to

Complete the sentences with the verbs below. If you cannot use 'can/can't', use 'be able to' in the correct tense or form.

help meet play relax run sing speak wait

- I'm sorry, I can't speak French.
- I _____ you for lunch tomorrow. I'm free all day.
- John _____ for months. His new job is very stressful.
- Usain Bolt _____ really fast. He's the Olympic champion.
- I might _____ you with your homework if you're having problems.
- He used to _____ well, but now he sounds awful.
- I _____ any more. Tell me the big news.
- She _____ the piano since she broke her arm two months ago.



3 Practice 2 - General or specific ability

Complete the sentences below using 'could/couldn't' or 'was/were able to' + the verbs in brackets.

1. Benjamin Franklin _____ (speak) English and French.
2. I looked everywhere, but I _____ (find) the right street.
3. _____ (you/convince) her to go out with you?
4. Patricia used to be a professional dancer. She _____ (dance) really well.
5. We _____ (contact) you. Was your phone switched off?
6. At the end of the long meeting, we _____ (make) a decision.
7. _____ (you/hear) me last night? I was trying to be quiet.
8. My laptop wasn't working properly, but in the end I _____ (fix) it.

In which of the sentences above can you use the structure 'managed to'? Rewrite them.

4 Practice 3

Write or say some sentences about you. Write about something ...

1. you have always wanted to be able to do (e.g. "I have always wanted to be able to sing like a professional singer.")
2. you have never been able to do
3. you will be able to do well in the future
4. you didn't manage to do last week
5. you could do well in the past