

Modals of Ability: Can & Could

1	Grammar Notes Can, Can't, Could & Couldn't	2
2	Matchup Can & Can't: Sentences	5
3	Writing about My Hobbies Can & Can't: Sentences	6
4	Pair Work Can & Can't: Questions	7
5	Find Someone Who Can & Can't: Questions	9
6	Fill in the Blanks Could & Couldn't: Sentences & Questions	10
7	Writing about My Childhood Could & Couldn't: Sentences	11
8	Complete the Story Can Vs. Could	12
9	Quiz Can Vs. Could	13
A	Answer Key	14

1 Grammar Notes

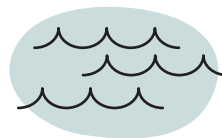
A. Introduction to Modals

A modal is a word that comes before a verb and gives it extra meaning like **ability** (*can*), **possibility** (*might*), **necessity** (*must*), etc.

All modals in English are followed by a base verb, which is a verb without any endings.

Examples:

- He **can swim**.
(can = modal of ability)
- She **might read** after dinner.
(might = modal of possibility)
- All bicycle riders **must wear** a helmet.
(must = modal of necessity)



1 Grammar Notes cont.

B. Can

Can is a **present** modal of ability.

	Pattern	Meaning	Examples
Positive	can + base verb	<i>Can + base verb</i> means that someone is able to do the action in the present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can play the piano. My brother can draw beautiful pictures. We can skateboard.
Negative	can't + base verb	<i>Can't + base verb</i> means that someone is not able to do the action in the present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She can't ski. They can't read yet. I can't ride a bicycle.
Question	can + subject + base verb	A question with <i>can + subject + base verb</i> asks if someone is able to do the action in the present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you dance? Yes, I can. / No, I can't. Can he sing? Yes, he can. / No, he can't. Can they go to the park after school? Yes, they can. / No, they can't.

Note #1

When speaking quickly, *can* has no stress when followed by a verb. *Can* is reduced to /kən/. We don't reduce *can't*.

Examples:

• I kən **ski**.

• She kən **sing**.

• Kən you **dance**?

But:

• Yes, I **can**.

• No, I **can't**.

• He **can't draw**.

Note #2

Can't is short for *cannot*. Notice the one-word spelling.

• She **cannot** swim.

• They **cannot** ski.

1 Grammar Notes cont.

C. Could

Could is a **past** modal of ability.

	Pattern	Meaning	Examples
Positive	could + base verb	<i>Could + base verb</i> means that someone was able to do the action in the past. There is usually a time marker to show the past time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She could dance at age 3. (time marker = at age 3) • His friend could watch free movies last summer. (time marker = last summer) • They could ski when they were little. (time marker = when they were little)
Negative	couldn't + base verb	<i>Couldn't + base verb</i> means that someone was not able to do the action in the past.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mrs. Jones couldn't dance 20 years ago. • They couldn't swim last year. • I couldn't draw a nice picture when I was 4 years old.
Question	could + subject + base verb	A question with <i>could + subject + base verb</i> asks if someone was able to do the action in the past.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you swim when you were 5 years old? Yes, I could. / No, I couldn't. • Could your teacher ski when he was a child? Yes, he could. / No, he couldn't. • Could your classmate ride a bicycle last year? Yes, she could. / No, she couldn't.

2 Matchup

Match the picture and the first half of the sentence with the correct verb.

Ex		He can	a	ski
1		She can	b	play video games
2		I can	c	ride a bicycle
3		He can	d	dance
4		They can	e	draw
5		You can	f	play the guitar
6		We can	g	skateboard
7		You can	h	run
8		I can	i	sing
9		She can	j	play the piano

3 Writing about My Hobbies

A. I can...

Write 5 sentences about what you **can** do.

<p>Ex I can draw.</p> <p>1 _____</p> <p>2 _____</p>	<p>3 _____</p> <p>4 _____</p> <p>5 _____</p>
--	--

B. I can't...

Write 5 sentences about what you **can't** do.

<p>Ex I can't ski.</p> <p>1 _____</p> <p>2 _____</p>	<p>3 _____</p> <p>4 _____</p> <p>5 _____</p>
---	--

C. Practice

Now read your sentences to a partner.
Practise the reduced pronunciation for *can*.









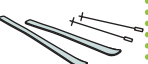

4 Pair Work (Student A)

Fill in the missing information about Maria and John by asking your partner questions. Put a ✓ if the person **can** do the action, and put an ✗ if the person **can't** do the action.

Examples

1 A: Can John draw?
B: No, he can't.

2 B: Can Maria draw?
A: Yes, she can.

								
Maria	✓		✗		✓		✗	
John		✓		✗		✓		✓







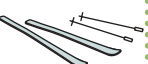

4 Pair Work (Student B)

Fill in the missing information about Maria and John by asking your partner questions. Put a ✓ if the person **can** do the action, and put an ✗ if the person **can't** do the action.

Examples

1 A: Can John draw?
B: No, he can't.

2 B: Can Maria draw?
A: Yes, she can.

								
Maria		✗		✓		✗		✓
John	✗		✓		✓		✗	

5 Find Someone Who

First, write the questions in the “Question” column.
Then ask different classmates these questions. If a classmate answers “Yes,” write his or her name in the “Name” column.

#	Find someone who...	Question	Name
1	can ski.	Can you ski?	
2	can draw an elephant.		
3	can sing.		
4	can dance.		
5	can swim.		
6	can play the guitar.		
7	can run very fast.		
8	can watch TV at night.		
9	can skateboard.		
10	can ride a bicycle.		

6 Fill in the Blanks

Look at the pictures. Then write **could** or **couldn't** and the verb from the picture in the blanks.

Ex



Brian couldn't ski when he was a child.

1



Samantha _____ when she was younger.

2



Mi Jin _____ the piano last year.

3



Lisa _____ the guitar last year.

4



Marco _____ when he was 5, but he can now.

5



Rashid _____ video games when his grandparents were visiting last week.

6



Could Julia _____ when she was a child?
Yes, she _____.

7



Could David _____ a bicycle when he was 2 years old?
No, he _____.

8



Could Tony _____ movies when he got in trouble?
No, he _____.

9



Could Marcia _____ 5 years ago?
Yes, she _____.

8 Complete the Story

Complete the story using **can** or **could**.

My Family

My name is Chris, and I want to tell you about my family. I have a mother, a father, an older brother, and a younger sister. What can my family do?

My father can play the guitar. My mother

Ex.

 sing beautifully. When my brother was

1.

5 years old , he speak English and Spanish.

2.

Now he also speak Japanese.

3.

My sister ride a bicycle when she was

4.

4 years old. She still ride a bicycle now, but

5.

she also skateboard. I not draw

6.

7.

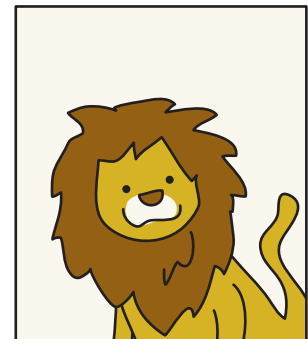
when I was 2 years old, but I now. I love

8.

drawing pictures of animals! you guess

9.

what I've drawn in this picture?



9 Quiz

Choose the best answer to complete each sentence.
Read the sentences carefully for clues.

- Ex** Jim was a talented musician. He _____ play the guitar and the drums.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could**
 - d) couldn't
- 1** We _____ finish our artwork because the fire alarm went off during class.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't
- 2** When he was younger, Mr. Little _____ swim very well. His nickname was "Fish."
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't
- 3** Tina _____ go to the park if she finishes all her homework.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't
- 4** _____ you ski when you were 5 years old?
- a) Can
 - b) Can't
 - c) Could
 - d) Couldn't
- 5** They _____ watch movies on weeknights because they have to study.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't
- 6** Shelly _____ dance when she was 6 years old because she took many lessons.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't
- 7** _____ you draw? I need help to finish this poster.
- a) Can
 - b) Can't
 - c) Could
 - d) Couldn't
- 8** I _____ finish this assignment. It's too difficult.
- a) can
 - b) can't
 - c) could
 - d) couldn't

A Answer Key

Lesson Description:

In this lesson, students learn to use modals for present and past ability. They practise these modals in speaking, writing, and pair work exercises. Reduced pronunciation practice and an exercise comparing *can* and *could* are also included.

Level: Low Int – Int

Time: 2–3 hours

Tags: can, could, modals, modal verbs, grammar, grammar practice, fun grammar lessons

2 Matchup

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. e | 3. c | 5. b | 7. f | 9. j |
| 2. d | 4. a | 6. h | 8. i | 10. g |

3 Writing about My Hobbies

Answers will vary.

4 Pair Work

Student A:

Maria...
...can't sing.
...can play the guitar.
...can't skateboard.
...can swim.

John...
...can't draw.
...can dance.
...can ride a bicycle.
...can't ski.

Student B:

Maria...
...can draw.
...can't dance.
...can ride a bicycle.
...can't ski.

John...
...can sing.
...can't play the guitar.
...can skateboard.
...can swim.

5 Find Someone Who

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct question formation, and encourage reduced pronunciation during the oral part of the activity.

6 Fill in the Blanks

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. could swim | 6. sing, could |
| 2. could play | 7. ride, couldn't |
| 3. couldn't play | 8. watch, couldn't |
| 4. couldn't skateboard | 9. dance could |
| 5. couldn't play | |

7 Writing about My Childhood

Answers will vary.

(continued on the next page...)

A Answer Key cont.

8 Complete the Story

- | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. can | 4. could | 7. could |
| 2. could | 5. can | 8. can |
| 3. can | 6. can | 9. Can |

9 Quiz

- | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. c | 3. c | 5. c | 7. c | 9. b |
| 2. d | 4. a | 6. b | 8. a | |

Editor's Note:

Both *cannot* and *can not* are acceptable spellings, though the first is much more common.