

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:

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