

Unit 31

Can, could, may and would: requests, permission, offers and invitations

a Asking people to do things (requests)



We often use **can** or **could** when we ask someone to do something:

Can you wait a moment, please?
Ann, **can you** do me a favour?
Excuse me. **Could you** tell me how to get to the station?
Do you think you could lend me some money?
I wonder if you could help me.

To ask for something you can say **Can I have ...?** / **Could I have ...?** / **May I have ...?**:

- (in a shop) **Can I have** these postcards, please?
- (at table) **Could I have** the salt, please?

b Asking for and giving permission

We often use **can**, **could** or **may** to ask permission to do something:

- (on the telephone) Hello, **can I** speak to Tom, please?
- '**Could I** use your telephone?' 'Yes, of course.'
- '**Do you think I could** borrow your bicycle?' 'Yes, help yourself.'
- '**May I** come in?' 'Yes, please do.'

To give permission, we use **can** or **may** (but *not could*):

- You **can** (or **may**) smoke if you like.

Use **can/can't** to talk about what is *already allowed* or *not allowed*:

- You **can drive** for a year in Britain with an international licence.
- If you're under 17, you **can't drive** a car in Britain.

c We sometimes use **can** when we offer to do things:

- '**Can I get you** a cup of coffee?' 'That's very nice of you.'
- (in a shop) '**Can I help you**, madam?' 'No thank you. I'm being served.'

d For offering and inviting we use **Would you like ...?** (not 'do you like'):

- **Would you like** a cup of coffee? (not 'do you like')
- **Would you like to come** to the cinema with us tomorrow evening? (not 'do you like to come')

I'd like (= **I would like**) is a polite way of saying what you want, or what you want to do:

- **I'd like** some information about hotels, please.
- **I'd like to try** on this jacket, please.

- '**Do you think I could** borrow your bicycle?' 'Yes, help yourself.'
- '**May I** come in?' 'Yes, please do.'