

Unit 26

Can, could and be able to

a We use **can** (do) to say that something is possible or that someone has the ability to do something. The negative is **can't** (cannot).

- You **can see** the sea from out bedroom window.
- **Can you speak** any foreign languages?
- I'm afraid I **can't come** to your party next Friday.

Be able to is possible instead of **can**, but **can** is more usual:

- **Are you able to speak** any foreign languages?

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (present) and **could** (past). So sometimes you have use **be able to**:

- I **haven't been able to sleep** recently. (**can** has no present perfect)
- Tom **might not be able to come** tomorrow. (**can** has no infinitive)

b Could and was able to

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with these verbs:

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

- When we went into the house, we **could smell** burning.
- She spoke in a low voice but I **could understand** what she was saying.

We also use **could** to say that someone had the general ability to do something:

- My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- When Tom was 16, he **could run 100 metres** in 11 seconds.

But if you mean that someone *managed* to do something *in one particular situation*, you have to use **was/were able to** (not **could**):

- The fire spread through the building very quickly but everyone **was able** (= managed) **to escape**. (*not* 'could escape')
- They **didn't want to come** with us at first but in the end we **were able** (= managed) **to persuade** them. (*not* 'could persuade')

Compare **could** and **was able to** in this example:

- Jack was an excellent tennis player. He **could** beat anybody. (= He had the ability to beat anybody.)
- But once he had a difficult game against Alf. Alf played very well but in the end Jack **was able to** beat him. (= He managed to beat him *in this particular game*.)

The negative **couldn't** is possible in all situations:

- My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- We tried hard but we **couldn't persuade** them to come with us.

For **can** see also **Unit 31**. For **could** see also **Units 27** and **31**.

- She spoke in a low voice but I **could understand** what she was saying.