

Can / Can't

Can is used to talk about ability and possibility, to ask for and give permission, and to make requests and offers.

Can is a modal auxiliary verb. It is followed by an infinitive without to.

There is no **-s** in the third person singular.

- ◆ I can swim. (=know how to)
- ◆ She can sing. (**NOT** She cans ...)
- ◆ He **can run** a mile in four minutes. (**NOT** He can to run...)
- ◆ She **can play** tennis very well. (**NOT** She can to play tennis...)

Questions and negatives are made without **do**:

- ◆ **Can** you speak French? (**NOT** Do you can speak French?)
- ◆ I **can't** swim. (**NOT** I don't can swim.)
- ◆ You **cannot** fool him. (**NOT** You don't can fool him.)

Pronunciation notes

- ◆ There are two main pronunciation problems related to *can/can't*
- ◆ *Can* is usually unstressed /kən/ in + sentences like *I can sing.*
- ◆ The negative *can't* is always stressed. Not stressing it can cause a communication problem (the listener may understand *can NOT can't*). The pronunciation of this word varies among different groups of native English speakers, from /ka:nt/ to /kænt/, The important thing is that we stress it quite strongly.
- ◆ Examples: *You can tell them.* / *You can't tell them.*
- ◆ We only stress *can* in short answers: Yes, I can.

To talk about theoretical possibility

- ◆ We can use **can** to talk about 'theoretical' possibility – to say that situations and events are possible theoretically.
- ◆ Glass **can be** blown. (It is theoretically possible to blow glass.)
- ◆ Wars **can break out** any time. (It is theoretically possible for wars to break out any time.)
- ◆ Smoking **can cause** cancer.
- ◆ Noise **can be** quite a problem when you are living in a city.

Note that we do not use **can** to talk about future probability – to say that something will happen in future. We express this idea with **may** or **might**.

- ◆ It **may** rain this evening. (NOT It **can** rain ...)
- ◆ There **may** be a strike next week. (NOT There **can** be a strike ...)
- ◆ I **may** get a job soon.

Note that **might** expresses a less definite possibility than **may**. **Could** is also used in the same sense.

- ◆ It **could** rain this evening. (= It **might** rain this evening.)

To talk about logical possibility

- ◆ **Can** is often used in questions and negatives to talk about the logical possibility that something is true.
- ◆ Example: *There is the doorbell. Who can it be?*
- ◆ With this meaning **can** is not possible in affirmative clauses. Instead, we use **could, may or might**.
- ◆ Example: *Where is John? He could/may/might be in the garden.* (NOT He can be in the garden.)

To talk about ability

We can use **can** to talk about present or general ability – to say that we are capable of doing something.

- ◆ I **can speak** 10 languages.
- ◆ She **can cook** well.
- ◆ **Can you knit?**
- ◆ I can drive a bus.

Note that **be able to** can often be used with similar meanings.

- ◆ He is able to support her.
 (= He can support her.)
- ◆ They were able to catch the thief. (= They could catch the thief.)

Cannot (also can't) shows inability.

- ◆ I **can speak** French, but I **cannot write** it.
- ◆ Most people **cannot read** traffic signals.
- ◆ I **can't** drive.
- ◆ We do not use **can** to talk about future ability. Instead, we use **will be able to** or other words.
- ◆ Someday scientists **will be able to** find a cure for cancer. (**NOT** Someday scientists will can find a cure for cancer.)

To ask for or give permission

Can is sometimes used to ask for and give permission. Some people, however, think that **may** is more correct than **can**.

- ◆ **Can** I use your car, John?
- ◆ **Can** we park over there?
- ◆ **You can** go out and play after you have finished your homework.
- ◆ You **can** park on either side of the road here.
- ◆ **Can** I go to the movies, mom?

Note that we can also use **could** to ask for permission. It is a more polite form of **can**.

- ◆ **Could** I speak to Mr. John, please?
- ◆ **Could** I have look at your newspaper?
- ◆ **Cannot** is used to refuse permission.
- ◆ Can I go to the movies, mom?
No, you can't.

To make requests and offers

Can is used in polite requests and offers of help.

- ◆ **Can** you turn that music down? I am trying to work.
- ◆ **Can** you get me a cup of coffee?
- ◆ **Can** I help you with those bags?

Note that **Could** is a more polite way of making requests and offers.

- ◆ **Could** you help me with my homework?
- ◆ **Could** you lend me some money?

Exercises

Complete with a suitable word:

- ◆ 1 I _____ go out tonight.
I'm busy.
- ◆ 2 Can you _____ to the cinema tonight?
- ◆ 3 You _____ park here. It's no parking.
- ◆ 4 _____ you tell me the time, please?
- ◆ 5 She can _____ English well.
- ◆ 6 I _____ play football, but not basketball

Complete the sentences with *can* or *can't*.

- ◆ 1 _____ I park my car here?
- ◆ 2 Where? I _____ see him.
- ◆ 3 _____ you help me with my homework?
- ◆ 4 You _____ smoke there, but not here.
- ◆ 5 Sorry. I _____ remember the answer.
- ◆ 6 I _____ speak Spanish and Italian.