

## GRAMMAR REFERENCE

Use *can* or *(be) able to* to talk about ability. *Can* has only two forms: *can* (present) and *could* (past). Use *be able to* when an infinitive is needed.

## Present ability

- Use *can* to talk about general or present ability.  
*I can speak French, but I can't speak German.*  
*Could you speak louder – I can't hear you.*
- Is/are able to* is possible instead of *can* but *can* is more common.  
*Are you able to hear me at the back of the room?*

## Past ability

- Use *could* to talk about general ability in the past and with verbs of perception (*feel, see, hear, etc.*).  
*Anna could speak four languages when she was six.*  
*I could see that she was upset.*
- For a single specific action in the past (as opposed to general ability), to mean 'tried and succeeded', use *was able to*.  
*I was able to run fast enough to catch the bus.*  
*I could run fast when I was young.*  
However, if the specific action is negative, use *couldn't* or *wasn't able to*.  
*I called customer services again and again, but I couldn't / wasn't able to get through.*
- To talk about a specific action in the past, especially when we succeed in doing something difficult after trying hard, use *managed to*. It can be used in the positive or negative.  
*They didn't want to give us the discount at first, but we managed to persuade them.*
- To refer to past ability with a connection to the present, use the present perfect form of *be able to*.  
*I have always been able to learn languages quite easily.*

## Future ability

Since *can* has no infinitive form, use *be able to* to talk about future ability

- after *will* and *going to*  
*Perhaps Jane will be able to help you.*  
*I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to do anything for you.*
- after modals  
*I may/might be able to help you.*
- after verbs like *would like to* and *want to*  
*I would like to be able to help you.*

## Language at work

- Complete 1–10 with the correct form of *can* or *be able to*. Sometimes more than one answer is possible.
  - Do you think you \_\_\_\_\_ come to the launch party next week?
  - We may \_\_\_\_\_ offer you a slightly better discount – I'll try my best.
  - So far I \_\_\_\_\_ (not) get in touch with her, but I'll keep trying.
  - As far as I \_\_\_\_\_ see, you have a valid complaint.
  - Do you know if Amanda \_\_\_\_\_ speak Spanish?
  - Do you think you will \_\_\_\_\_ finish on time, or will you need a few more days?
  - I'm afraid I \_\_\_\_\_ (not) come to the meeting next week.
  - We'll need an interpreter because I \_\_\_\_\_ (not) speak Chinese.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ (she) finish that report yet?
  - I \_\_\_\_\_ understand your worries, but I think we should take the risk.
- Choose the correct words in *italics*.
  - A Did the hotel have a good view of the mountains?  
B Yes, I *could* / *was able to* see Mont Blanc from my room.
  - A When I got to the office, I was locked out.  
B How *could you* / *were you able to* get in?
  - A So what happened when you missed the plane?  
B Luckily I *could* / *was able to* take another flight.
  - A Did she complain to you, too?  
B Yes she did, but I *couldn't* / *wasn't able to* understand what the problem was.
  - A If the safe was locked, how *could you* / *were you able to* get the documents out?  
B One of the managers had a spare key.
  - A What did you think when you heard Jan had been promoted?  
B Well, at first I *couldn't* / *wasn't able to* believe it.
  - A Did you renegotiate the contract?  
B Yes, we *could* / *were able to* obtain a slightly better deal.
  - A *Could you* / *Were you able to* contact Katie?  
B No, not yet, but I'll call again later.