



## Modal Verbs of Ability

When we talk about ability, we mean two things.

1. First, we mean *general* ability. This is something that once you have learned you can do any time you want, like being able to read or swim or speak a language, for example.
2. The other kind of ability is *specific* ability. This means something that you can or can't do in one particular situation. For example, being able to lift something heavy, or find somewhere you are looking for.

### Present

can / can't (for both general and specific ability)

- I **can** play the piano.
- She **can** speak English.
- He **can't** drive – he's too tired.
- We **can't** come now.

### Past

could / couldn't (for general ability)

- I **could** read when I was four.
- She **could** speak French when she was a child, but now she has forgotten it.
- He **couldn't** dance at all until he took lessons.
- My grandfather **couldn't** swim.



was able to / couldn't (for specific ability)

- When the computer crashed yesterday, I **was able to** fix it. (not 'I could fix it')
- She **was able to** pass the exam, even though she hadn't studied much. (not 'she could pass')
- He called us because he **couldn't** find the house.
- I **couldn't** open the window.

could + have + past participle (an ability someone had in the past, but didn't use)

- I **could have played** the piano well, but I didn't practise enough.
- We **could have come** earlier.
- She **could have studied** law, but she preferred to become a secretary.

## Future

will / won't be able to (general ability)

- At the end of the course, you **will be able to** make your own website.
- He **won't be able to** speak Japanese in a week! It will take months.

can / can't (specific ability)

- I **can** help you tomorrow.
- I **can't** come to the party.