

can, could, be able to (ability and possibility)

can / could

I **can** speak three languages fluently.
 Jenny **can't** come tonight. She's ill.
 My cousin **could** play the violin when she was three.
 They **couldn't** wait because they were in a hurry.
Could you open the door for me, please?

- *can* is a modal verb. It only has a present form (which can be used with future meaning) and a past or conditional form (*could*).
- For all other tenses and forms, we use *be able to* + infinitive.

be able to + infinitive

- 1 Luke **has been able to** swim since he was three.
 I'd like **to be able to** ski.
 I love **being able to** stay in bed late on Sunday morning.
 You'll **be able to** practise your English in London.
- 2 Fortunately, I **am able to** accept your invitation.
 My colleagues **weren't able to** come to yesterday's meeting.

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- 1 We use *be able to* + infinitive for ability and possibility, especially where there is no form of *can*, e.g. future, present perfect, infinitive and gerund, etc.
- 2 We sometimes use *be able to* in the present and past (instead of *can* / *could*), usually if we want to be more formal.

a Complete with the correct form of *be able to* (+, -, or ?).

- I've never been able to scuba dive.
- 1 Her mobile has been switched off all morning, so I _____ talk to her yet.
 - 2 I don't like noisy bars. I like _____ have a conversation without shouting.
 - 3 I _____ leave home when I get a job.
 - 4 We're having a party next Saturday. _____ you _____ come?
 - 5 You need _____ swim before you can go in a canoe.
 - 6 I'm going to France next week, but I don't speak French. I hate _____ communicate with people.
 - 7 Fortunately, firefighters _____ rescue all of the people trapped inside the burning house.
 - 8 I'm very sorry, but we _____ go to your wedding next month. We'll be on holiday.
 - 9 I'm feeling a bit worse. _____ you _____ contact the doctor yet?
 - 10 The manager _____ see you right now because he's in a meeting.

b Circle the correct form. Tick ✓ if both are possible.



I've always wanted to can / be able to dance salsa.

- 1 My little boy couldn't / wasn't able to speak until he was nearly two years old.
- 2 She's much better after her operation. She'll can / be able to walk again in a few months.
- 3 He hasn't could / been able to mend my bike yet. He'll do it tomorrow.
- 4 It's the weekend at last! I love can / being able to go out with my friends.
- 5 When we lived on the coast, we used to can / be able to go to the beach every day.
- 6 I can't / 'm not able to send any emails at the moment. My computer isn't working.
- 7 I could / was able to read before I started school.
- 8 We won't can / be able to go on holiday this year because we need to spend a lot of money on the house.
- 9 Linda's really pleased because she's finally could / been able to find a part-time job.
- 10 Alex can / is able to speak Portuguese fluently after living in Lisbon for ten years.