

46 Ability and possibility

can, could, be able to



- CATHY That's a smart new phone. Does it work in the USA?
- TIM Yes, you **can use** it anywhere in the world.
- CATHY So I suppose you've got a new phone number ...
- TIM No. I **was able to transfer** my old number to the new phone.

1 can and other modal verbs

We use a modal verb with another verb to show that an action is possible, necessary or certain. We also use modal verbs to ask permission or to give advice.

POSITIVE	<i>I can swim. You must leave. She should go.</i>
NEGATIVE	<i>I cannot (can't) dance. He must not (mustn't) stop. We could not (couldn't) leave.</i>
QUESTIONS	<i>Can you speak French? (No, I can't) Should they leave? (Yes, they should.) What can you do? Where should we go?</i>

Modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, should, must, would, will and shall*) are different from other verbs.

- We use them + infinitive without *to*:
X You can to use it anywhere. ✓ You can use it anywhere.
- They have the same form for all subjects:
X My brother cans swim. ✓ My brother can swim.
- We form negatives with *not* or *n't* (not *doesn't* or *don't*):
X I don't can speak Japanese. ✓ I can't speak Japanese.
- We put the modal verb in front of the subject for questions. We don't use *do/does/did*:
X Does she can play tennis? ✓ Can she play tennis?
- They don't have infinitive or *-ing* forms. If we need to use an infinitive or *-ing* form, we use a form with a similar meaning, e.g. for *can* we use *be able to*:
X I want to can play the guitar. ✓ I want to be able to play the guitar.
X I love can stay up late. ✓ I love being able to stay up late.
- They don't have participle (*-ed, -ing*) forms, so we can't make continuous or perfect tenses with them. Instead we change the main verb:
They can't be waiting for us. They can't have used it yet.

'Modal perfects', e.g. *He must have done it.* ➤ Units 51.3 and 84.1

- We can make modals passive. We use a modal verb + a form of *be* + past participle (➤ Unit 84.1): *Members can use this car park. → This car park can be used by members.*

2 can for present ability and possibility

We use *can* or *be able to* to say that it is possible to do something, or that somebody/something has an ability to do something:

You can use this phone anywhere in the world. Can you speak Japanese?

We usually pronounce *can* as /kən/ in statements and *Wh-* questions:

Karl can speak Japanese. When can we play tennis?

We sometimes use the strong form /kæn/ in *yes/no* questions and always in short answers:
Can Karl play tennis? Yes, he can.

The negative *can't* is /kɑ:nt/ in most varieties of British English: *I can't read music.*



Pronunciation ➤ 1.22