

- We use *be able to* when something is surprising or requires some effort:  
*It's amazing – some animals **are able to sleep standing up!***  
*Because of her illness, Alice **isn't able to see visitors.***
- We use *can/can't* with verbs of the senses (e.g. *see, hear, smell*) and some verbs of thinking (e.g. *believe, forget, remember*) to describe an action happening now:  
*I **can smell** something bad. **Can you remember** her name?*  
*I **can't believe** this computer's so slow!*

If we are NOT sure if something is possible, we use *may, might*, etc. (► Units 47 and 48):  
*This phone **might work** in the USA, but I'm not sure.*

### 3 Future ability and possibility

To talk about what we can do in the future we use these modals:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>be able to</i> for situations that are certain                  | <i>After you receive your password, you'll <b>be able to visit</b> our new website.</i><br><i>I <b>won't be able to eat</b> for three hours after the operation.</i> |
| <i>can</i> for future personal arrangements                        | <i>The dentist <b>can see</b> you on Friday.</i><br><i><b>Can you meet</b> me at the airport on Tuesday?</i>   |
| <i>could</i> for situations that are possible but unlikely         | <i>We <b>could give up</b> our jobs and live on a desert island.</i><br><i>I'm so angry I <b>could scream.</b> (NOT can)</i>   |
| <i>could</i> or <i>would be able to</i> for conditional situations | <i>If you had a credit card, you <b>could buy</b> it on the Internet.</i><br><i>If you <b>learnt to sing</b>, you'd <b>be able to join</b> the music group.</i>      |

Second conditional ► Unit 55

### 4 Past ability and possibility

To talk about past ability and possibility, we use *could/couldn't* or *was/were able to*:

*Before I got this job I **couldn't afford** a car.*  
*When I was young I **was able to run** for miles without getting tired.*  
***Could** the first cameras **take** colour photos?*

! But if we are making a positive statement about a single event in the past, or asking a question about it, we use *was/were able to*, NOT *could*:

*X I ~~could~~ transfer my old number. ✓ I **was able to transfer** my old number.*

For negative statements we can use *couldn't* or *wasn't/weren't able to*:

*We **weren't able to get** any cheap flights. We **couldn't get** any cheap flights.*

If something was particularly difficult, we can use *managed to*:

*I washed it twice but I'm afraid I **didn't manage to get rid of** that stain on your shirt.*

We often use *managed to* with expressions like *in the end*, *eventually* and *finally*:

*It took a while, but **in the end** we **managed to find** some cheap flights on the Internet.*

### 5 General truths

We use *can* for something that is generally possible:

*It **can be** very cold in New York in January. (= It is sometimes very cold.)*

*Life **can be** very hard for people on low incomes.*

*Bad weather **can cause** flight delays at any time.*

We use *could* to talk about general truths in the past:

*In the days of sailing ships it **could take** many months to travel across the Atlantic.*