

# 52 Permission

## *can, may, might, could, be allowed to*

Can I use my laptop?

I'm sorry. Passengers **aren't allowed to use** electronic devices during take-off.

### 1 Asking for and giving/refusing permission

	ASKING FOR PERMISSION	GIVING PERMISSION	REFUSING PERMISSION
informal	<i>Can I use my laptop?</i>	Yes, you <b>can</b> . Yes, of course (you <b>can</b> ). Yes, sure.	No, you <b>can't</b> . No, I'm sorry.
formal/ polite	<i>Could I ask a question?</i> <i>May I make a suggestion?</i> <i>Might I interrupt for a moment?</i>	Yes, you <b>can/may</b> . Yes, of course/ certainly.	No, you <b>can't/may not</b> . No, I'm sorry/I'm afraid not.

#### FORMALITY CHECK To ask for permission

- we use **can** in most situations, but if we need to be polite, or if we think permission will be refused, we use **may**, **could** or **might**. **Might** is the most formal.  
*May I leave early today?* (to your boss) **Could** we stay an extra night? (to a hotel clerk)  
**Might** I ask a question? (in a formal business meeting)
- we can also use *Do you mind if ...* (formal), *Is it all right if ...* and *Is it OK to ...* :  
*Do you mind if I open the window?* *Is it all right if I use your bathroom?* *Is it OK to bring a friend?*

When we refuse permission we often give a reason:

'Can we park here?' 'No, I'm sorry. It's only for hotel guests.'

- ! We don't use **could** or **might** when we give or refuse permission:
- Could I use your bathroom?* } ~~Yes, you could.~~ ~~No, you couldn't.~~ ~~Yes, you might.~~  
*Might I ask a question?* } ✓ Yes, you **can**. ✓ No, you **can't**.

#### 🔊 Pronunciation ▶ 1.26

### 2 Permission in rules and laws

We use **can/can't** or **be (not) allowed to** when we talk about permission in rules and laws:

*In the USA you **can** turn right at a red traffic light.*

*You **can't** ride a motorbike without a helmet in the UK.*

*Are we **allowed to** take photos in the museum?*

*Passengers **aren't allowed to** use electronic devices during take-off.*

We can also use **may/may not** to describe rules in written instructions:

*Passengers **may** use electronic devices once the seat belt signs have been switched off.*

### 3 Permission in the past and future

To talk about permission in the past, we use **could/couldn't** or **was/were allowed to**:

*In the 1960s you **could** drive without a seat belt. You **couldn't** wear jeans at my old school.*

*I **was allowed to** stay up quite late when I was young.*

*In the nineteenth century women **weren't allowed to** vote in elections.*

- ! But to talk about permission for a single action in the past, we use **allowed to**, not **could**:  
~~*We could go home early last Friday.*~~ ✓ *We **were allowed to** go home early last Friday.*

We can use **will/won't be allowed to** to talk about permission at a time in the future:

*After you complete the training, you'll **be allowed to** use the equipment on your own.*

*The play starts at eight o'clock. You **won't be allowed to** enter the theatre after that.*