



Can, could and be able to

Área Lectura y Escritura, Inglés

Resultados de aprendizaje

Conocer las diferencias de uso entre can, could y be able to.

Utilizar los verbos modales can, could y be able to en situaciones formales e informales de escritura.

Contenidos

1. Verbos modales
2. Verbos en su forma base

Debo saber

Para desarrollar esta guía de mejor manera, es necesario que el estudiante deba tener conocimientos de los siguientes tiempos verbales:

- *Pasado Simple*
- *Pasado Continuo*

En caso de no poseer los conocimientos anteriormente nombrados, puedes revisar la carpeta de inglés del área de lectura y escritura, donde encontrarás guías de trabajo e introducción a los tiempos verbales mencionados.

Can, could and be able to

We use **can (do)** to say that something is possible or that someone has the ability to do something. The negative is **can't (cannot)**.

- You **can see** the sea from our bedroom window.
- **Can you speak** any foreign languages?
- I'm afraid I **can't come** to your party next Friday.

Be able to is possible instead of can, but can is more usual:

- **Are you able to speak** any foreign languages?

But '**can**' has only two forms: can (present) and could (past). So sometimes you have to use be able to:

- I haven't **been able** to sleep recently (can has no present perfect)
- Tom **might not be able** to come tomorrow. (can has no infinitive)



Could and was able to

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with these verbs:

See Hear Smell Taste Feel Remember Understand

- When we went into the house, we **could smell** burning.
- She spoke in a low voice but I **could understand** what she was saying.

We also use **could** to say that someone had the general ability to do something:

- My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- When Tom was 16, **he could run** 100 meters in 11 seconds.

But if you mean that someone managed to do something in one particular situation, you have to use **was/were able to** (not **could**):

- The fire spread through the building very quickly but everyone **was able** (= managed) to escape. (not 'could persuade')
- They didn't want to come with us at first but in the end we **were able** (=managed) to persuade them. (Not 'could persuade').

Compare **could** and **was able to** in this example:

- Jack was an excellent tennis player. He **could beat** anybody. (= he had the ability to speak anybody).
- But once he had a difficult game against Alf. Alf played very well but in the end Jack **was able to beat** him. (= He managed to beat him in this particular game.)

The negative **couldn't** is possible in all situations:

- My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- We tried hard but we **couldn't persuade** them to come with us.



Exercises

1. In this exercise you have to use **can** or **be able to**. Sometimes it is possible to use either; sometimes only **be able to** is possible.

Example: 'George has travelled a lot. He **can (or is able to)** speak four languages.
I haven't **been able** to sleep very well recently.

1. Tom _____ drive but he hasn't got a car.
2. I can't understand Martin. I've never _____ understand him.
3. I used to _____ stand on my head but I can't do it now.
4. Ask Ann about your problem. She should _____ help you.

2. In this exercise you have to complete the sentence with **could ...**

Example: I can't sing now but **I could sing** very well when I was a child.

1. He can't play tennis very well now but he _____ quite well when he was younger.
2. She can't run very fast now but when she was at school she _____ faster than anyone else.
3. I can't swim very far these days but ten years ago I _____ from one side of the lake to the other.

3. This time you have to answer the questions with **was/were able to**.

Example: Jill's coat was dirty so she took it to the cleaners. Now it is clean. What has Jill done? **She has had her coat cleaned.**

1. Did they find your house?
Yes. It took them a long time but they _____.
2. Did you win the match?
Yes. It wasn't easy but I _____.
3. Did the thief escape?
Yes. The policeman chased the thief but he _____.

4. Now you have to complete a sentence with **could, was/were able to or couldn't**.

Example: My grandfather was very clever. He **could (or was able to) speak** five languages.
I looked everywhere for the book but I **couldn't find it**.
The fire spread quickly but everyone **was able to escape**.



1. He had hurt his leg, so he _____ walk very well.
2. She wasn't at home when I phoned but I _____ contact her at her office.
3. I looked very carefully and I _____ see a figure in the distance.
4. They didn't have any tomatoes in the first shop I went to, but I _____ get some in the next shop.
5. My grandmother loved music. She _____ play the piano very well.
6. The boy fell into the river but fortunately we _____ rescue him.



Key

1. In this exercise you have to use can or be able to. Sometimes it is possible to use either; sometimes only be able to is possible.
 1. Can / is able to
 2. Been able to
 3. Be able to
 4. Be able to

2. In this exercise you have to complete the sentence with **could ...**
 1. Could play (tennis)
 2. Could run
 3. Could swim

3. This time you have to answer the questions with **was/were able to**.
 1. Were able to find it.
 2. Was able to win (it)
 3. Was able to escape.

4. Now you have to complete a sentence with **could, was/were able to or couldn't**.
 1. Couldn't / wasn't able to
 2. Was able to
 3. Could/ able to
 4. Was able to
 5. Could / was able to
 6. Were able to