

The Differences Between CAN and COULD

CAN and COULD: When do we use them?

First things first, welcome to our website!

Please take a notebook and a pen to write down important information. You will thus be more active and will get more out of this post.

Moving forward, this is actually the second lesson in the **modal verbs** or **modal auxiliaries** [series](#).

REMEMBER:

- There are 9 **modal verbs** in English: **Must, Can, Could, May, Might, Will, Would, Shall** and **Should**.
- **Modal verbs** are tools that help us to express modality. In fact, **modals** allow the speaker to express his or her point of view regarding an action, an event or a situation.
- **Modal verbs** always remain the same no matter the subject and cannot be conjugated.

Moreover, they do not have **present** and **past participles**. (I ~~am~~ **canning** go./ I ~~have~~ **canned** go.)

MODAL VERB (CAN)

AFFIRMATIVE FORM					
I	You	He/She/It	We	You	They
can					

NEGATIVE FORM (FULL AND SHORT FORMS)							
I	You	He	She	It	We	You	They
cannot can't							

INTERROGATIVE FORM							
Can							
I	you	he	she	it	we	you	they
go?							



Step 1: Characteristics of CAN

- We use **CAN** in the present tense. (E.g. *I can swim.*)
- A verb stem always follows **CAN**. (E.g. *He can dance very well.*) The verb stem is also known as the base of a verb. You can find examples of verb stems in the [dictionary](#).
- We do not add 'TO' after **CAN**. (E.g. *She can ~~to~~ speak Spanish.*)
- **CAN** is able to replace auxiliary verbs such as **DO** and **BE** which help us to form questions. (E.g. *How can I help you?*)

Step 2: Examples of CAN in the Affirmative Form (+)

Expressing Possibility

Here, **CAN** refers to a situation that is likely to happen but is not certain.

- He can come today.
- She can succeed in her project.
- You can become an English teacher one day. You never know!

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **possibility** in the present using **CAN**.

Expressing Ability

In this case, **CAN** refers to something that someone is able to do.

- He can swim.
- My sister can ride a bike.
- They can speak several languages.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **ability** in the present using **CAN**.

Giving Permission

We can also use **CAN** to tell someone that they are allowed to do something. **CAN** is less formal than **MAY**.

- You can swim here.
- They can stay in our house.
- He can enter the room.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you give someone permission in the present using **CAN**.

Step 3: Examples of CAN in the Negative Form (-)

Expressing Impossibility

In this context, we use **CAN + NOT** to talk about something that is unlikely to happen. It is not certain.

- He can't come today. It's raining.
- She cannot become a politician one day. She is too honest.
- We can't be late. The bus is already here.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **impossibility** in the present using **CAN + NOT**.

Expressing Prohibition

This is another usage of **CAN + NOT** in which the subject does not have permission to do something.

- She can't go out. She's grounded.
- You can't stay in this area. It's protected.
- They cannot smoke here. It is forbidden.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **prohibition** in the present using **CAN + NOT**.

Expressing Inability

This is when **CAN + NOT** are used to talk about something that someone is not able to do.

- I can't ski. I don't know how to do this.
- He can't speak Japanese even though he has been trying for years.

- We can't sit still in class when the lesson is boring.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject expresses **inability** in the present using **CAN + NOT**.

Step 4: Examples of CAN in the Interrogative Form(?)

Asking for Permission

Here, we use **CAN** to ask somebody if we can do something.

- Can I go to the bathroom, teacher?
- Can we stay here? Is it allowed?
- Can they leave their stuff here?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks for **permission** from someone in the present using **CAN**.

Asking Questions in Conditional Sentences

Here, we use **CAN** to ask **WH-** or **Yes/NO** questions in hypothetical or unreal situations.

- What can I do if I feel sick on the plane?
- Can I come if I bring some cake?
- How can I write an essay on immigration if I don't know anything about the subject?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks **WH-** or **Yes/No** questions in **conditional sentences** using **CAN**.

Asking for Information

In this case, **CAN** behaves like an auxiliary verb and helps us to form **WH-**questions.

- What can I do to make you feel happy?
- How can I help you?
- When can I come?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks for **information** using **CAN**.

Making Requests

In this incident, the speaker **can** use **CAN** 😊 to ask something from someone.

- Can I call you today?
- Jane, can you help me with my homework?
- Can you come with me?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject makes a **request** using **CAN**.

Making Offers

It is also possible for you to use **CAN** to ask someone if you can do something for them.

- Can I drive you to the airport?
- Mum, can I help you with the dishes?
- Can we mow your lawn, grandpa?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject makes an **offer** using **CAN**.

MODAL VERB (COULD)

AFFIRMATIVE FORM

I	You	He/She/It	We	You	They
could					

NEGATIVE FORM (FULL AND SHORT FORMS)

I	You	He	She	It	We	You	They
could not couldn't							

INTERROGATIVE FORM

Could							
I	you	he	she	it	we	you	they
go?							



Step 5: Characteristics of COULD

- We use **COULD** as the past tense of **CAN**. (E.g. *I could speak Italian with my nanny when I was 5.*)
- We also use **COULD** in [second conditionals](#). (E.g. *If I had a lot of money, I could go to Malawi every month.*) This past form of **CAN** is also called the unreal past because it refers to an unreal or hypothetical situation. However, note that the action '*go to Malawi*' will happen in the **future**.
- A verb stem always follows **COULD**. (E.g. *He could dance very well.*) The verb stem is also known as the base of a verb. You can find examples of verb stems in the [dictionary](#).)
- We do not add 'TO' after **COULD**. (E.g. *She could ~~to~~ speak Spanish.*)
- **COULD** is able to replace auxiliary verbs such as **DO** and **BE** which help us to form questions. (E.g. *How could you do this to me?*)

Step 6: Examples of COULD in the Affirmative Form (+)

Expressing Possibility in the Past

Here, **COULD + HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)** refer to a situation that did not happen in the past but was likely to happen. Sometimes, this tone can be [reproachful](#).

- He could have come that day.
- She could have succeeded in her project.
- You could have become an English teacher.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **possibility in the past** using **COULD + HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)**.

Expressing Possibility in the Future

In this instance, **COULD** helps us to say that there is a chance that a situation can be realised in the future.

- I could come tomorrow.

- We could talk to him.
- The train could arrive at any time.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **possibility in the future** using **COULD**.

Expressing Possibility in the Future in Conditional Sentences

In this case, we use **COULD** to refer to a hypothetical situation that is possible in the future, depending on the realisation of a previous action.

- If they were rich, they could buy a mansion with a swimming pool.
- I could stop living in the city, if I became famous.
- If they talked to him, he could give them the solutions to their problems.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **possibility in the future** in **conditional sentences** using **COULD**.

Expressing Ability in the Past

In this case, **COULD** refers to something that someone was able to do in the past.

- He could swim across that big river when he was sixteen.
- My sister could ride a bike as soon as she was five.
- In the past, people could communicate with each other using telephone booths.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **ability in the past** using **COULD**.

Gives Permission in the Past

We can equally use **COULD** to say that someone was allowed to do something in the past.

- He could stay with us.
- We could watch TV until late at night.
- They could go to the cinema when they were ten.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which we say that someone was allowed to do something in the past.

Step 7: Examples of COULD in the Negative Form (-)

Expressing Impossibility in the Past

In this context, we use **COULD + NOT +HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)** to talk about something that was unlikely to happen in the past.

- He couldn't have done it. He was away at that time.
- She couldn't have written the letter. She was sick.
- They couldn't have changed their address. I saw their car yesterday.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **impossibility in the past** using **COULD + NOT +HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)**.

Expressing Impossibility in the Past in Third Conditionals

In this context, we use **COULD + NOT +HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)** to talk about something that did not happen in the past but there was a possibility for its realisation if another action had been done.

- He couldn't have done it, if I had come after seven.
- She couldn't have stayed with him, if she hadn't felt supported.
- They could not have won the game, if they had not listened to the coach's advice.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **impossibility in the past in third conditionals** using **COULD + NOT +HAVE-EN/ED (Present Perfect)**.

Expressing Prohibition in the Past

This is another usage of **COULD + NOT** in which the subject did not have the permission to do something in the past.

- She couldn't go out. She was grounded.
- You couldn't stay in that area. It was protected.
- They could not smoke there. It was forbidden.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **prohibition in the past** using **COULD + NOT**.

Expressing Inability in the Past

This is when **COULD + NOT** are used to talk about something that someone was not able to do in the past.

- I couldn't speak for days.
- He couldn't eat after the operation.
- We could not open the door despite our efforts.

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which you express **inability in the past** using **COULD + NOT**.

Step 8: Examples of COULD in the Interrogative Form(?)

Asking for Permission in a Polite Way

Here, we use **COULD** to ask somebody if we can do something in a civil or well-mannered way.

- Could I go to the bathroom, teacher?
- Could we stay here? Is it allowed?
- Could they leave their stuff here?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks for **permission** from someone do something in a **polite manner** using **COULD**.

Asking Questions about Possibility

We can use **COULD** to ask questions about the likelihood of something happening. Here, it is almost as if the speaker were guessing.

- What could be the reason of his silence?
- Could this make you happy?
- What could bring joy in your life?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks **questions about possibility** using **COULD**.

Asking questions in Conditional Sentences

In this case, we use **COULD** to form **WH-** and **Yes/No questions** in hypothetical or unreal situations.

- How could I help you if you were very sick?
- Could you write an essay about developing countries if you were asked to do it?
- What could happen if the earth stopped revolving around the sun?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks **for information** in **conditional sentences** using **COULD**.

Making Polite Requests

In this incident, the speaker uses **COULD** to ask something from someone in a civil way.

- Could I call you today?
- Jane, could you help me with my homework?
- Could you come with me?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject asks **polite requests** using **COULD**.

Making Polite Offers

It is also possible for you to use **COULD** to ask someone if you can do something for them. This is a more polite way of doing it.

- Could I drive you to the airport?
- Mum, could I help you with the dishes?
- Could we mow your lawn, grandpa?

Your Turn: Make 3 sentences in which the subject **makes polite offers** using **COULD**.

Watch: How Do We Use **CAN** and **COULD**?



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