

# CAN, COULD, BE ABLE TO

**Can** and **could** are modal verbs, i.e. they are "help" verbs, used with a main verb to express a certain meaning. **Can** only has two forms, **can** (present) and **could** (past). **Can** does not conjugate like a normal verb. N.B. not "**can to..**" ☹

**1. CAN:** we use "can" to say that something is **possible**, or that we have the **ability** to do it (we are able to do it).

For example:

"I **can speak** English very well." (ability)

"I **can meet** you at 5pm." (possibility)

The negative of **can** is **can't**.

For example:

"I **can't come** to class tomorrow." (impossibility)

"You **can't play** football standing on one leg."  
(inability)

**2. COULD** is usually the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:

**see hear smell taste feel remember understand**

For example:

"My grandfather **could dance** the tango." (past ability)

"I'm sorry I **couldn't do** my homework because I was kidnapped by space aliens." (past impossibility)

**3. BE ABLE TO:** is possible instead of **can** or **could**, but sounds very formal.

"I **am able to** speak English very well."

"I'm sorry. I **wasn't able to** do my homework."

However, because **can** and **could** only have two forms, sometimes it is necessary to use **be able to** for other tenses:

For example:

"I **haven't been able to** sleep recently."  
(can has no present perfect)

"I **might be able to** come tomorrow."  
(can has no infinitive)