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"Can" is one of the most commonly used modal verbs in English. It can be used to express ability or opportunity, to request or offer permission, and to show possibility or impossibility. Examples: I can ride a horse. We can stay with my brother when we are in Paris. She cannot stay out after 10 PM. Can you hand me the stapler? Any child can grow up to be president. Most modal verbs behave quite irregularly in the past and the future. Study the chart below to learn how "can" behaves in different contexts. Modal Use Positive Forms1. = Present 2. = Past 3. = Future Negative Forms1. = Present 2. = Past 3. = Future Also use: can 1. I can speak Chinese. 2. SHIFT TO "COULD" I could speak Chinese when I was a kid. 3. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" I will be able to speak Chinese by the time I finish my course. 1. I can't speak Swahili. 2. SHIFT TO "COULD" I couldn't speak Swahili. 3. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" I won't be able to speak Swahili. be able to can 1. With a burst of adrenaline, people can pick up cars. 2. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" With a sudden burst of adrenaline, he was able to lift the car off the child's leg. 3. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" Even the weight lifter, wasn't able to lift the car off the child's leg. 3. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" Even three men working together won't be able to lift the car. be able to can 1. I have some free time. I can help her now. 2. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" I had some free time yesterday. I was able to help her at that time. 3. I'll have some free time tomorrow. I can help her then. 1. I don't have any time. I can't help her now. 2. SHIFT TO "BE ABLE TO" I didn't have time yesterday. I wasn't able to help her at that time. 3. I won't have any time later. I can't help her then. be able to can 1. I can drive Susan's car when she is out of town. 2. SHIFT TO "BE ALLOWED TO " I was allowed to drive Susan's car while she was out of town last week. 3. I can drive Susan's car while she is out of town next week. 1. I can't drive Susan's car when she is out of town. 2. SHIFT TO "BE ALLOWED TO " I wasn't allowed to drive Susan's car while she was out of town last week. 3. I can't drive Susan's car while she is out of town next week. may can Can I have a glass of water? Can you give me a lift to school? Can't I have a glass of water? Can't you give me a lift to school? could, may can Anyone can become rich and famous if they know the right people. Learning a language can be a real challenge. It can't cost more than a dollar or two. You can't be 45! I thought you were about 18 years old. could Can Exercises Learn English at Englishpage.com! CANdiensten is the specialist in software for Mathematics, Statistics, Assessment, Optimal Digital Learning, AI and more. Apart from the distribution of products such as Mathematica, Mbius and Scientific WorkPlace in the Benelux we organize workshop, bootcamps, courses, presentations and user-days. to be able to; have the ability, power, or skill to.She can solve the problem easily, I'm sure.to know how to.He can play chess, although he's not particularly good at it.to have the power or means to.A dictator can impose his will on the people.to have the right or qualifications to.He can change whatever he wishes in the script.may; have permission to.Can I speak to you for a moment?to have the possibility.A coin can land on either side. can, can, canst, can, can, could, could, couldst, could, can, can, could, cunning a sealed container for food, beverages, etc., as of aluminum, sheet iron coated with tin, or other metal.a receptacle for garbage, ashes, etc., a bucket, pail, or other container for holding or carrying liquids.a drinking cup; tankard.a metal or plastic container for holding film on cores or reels.Slang: Usually Vulgar-, toilet; bathroom.Slang-, jail.He's been in the can for a week Slang: Sometimes Vulgar-, buttocks Slang-, cans, a set of headphones designed to cover the ears.Military Slang a depth charge a destroyer: to preserve by sealing in a can, jar, etc.Slang-, to dismiss; fire.Slang-, to throw (something) away.Slang-, to put a stop to.to record, as on film or tape.a container, esp for liquids, usually of thin sheet metalanother name (esp US) for tinAlso called: canful.the contents of a can or the amount a can will holda slang word for prisona slang word for toilet or buttocks See toiletnavy a slang word for destroyerslang, navy a depth chargea shallow cylindrical metal container of varying size used for storing and handling filminformal, a complicated problemSee carry(of a film, piece of music, etc) having been recorded, processed, edited, etcinformal, arranged or agreedthe contract is almost in the canCollins English Dictionary Complete & Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012to put (food, etc) into a can or cans; preserve in a canslang, (tr) to dismiss from a jobinformal, (tr) to stop (doing something annoying or making an annoying noise) (esp in the phrase can it!) informal, (tr) to reject or discardCollins English Dictionary Complete & Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012used as an auxiliary to indicate ability, skill, or fitness to perform a taskI can run a mile in under four minutesused as an auxiliary to indicate permission or the right to somethingused as an auxiliary to indicate knowledge of how to do somethinghe can speak three languages fluentlyused as an auxiliary to indicate the possibility, opportunity, or likelihoodmy trainer says I can win the race if I really work hardCollins English Dictionary Complete & Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012Can but and cannot but are formal and now somewhat old-fashioned expressions suggesting that there is no possible alternative to doing something. Can but is equivalent to can only: We can but do our best. Cannot but is the equivalent of cannot help but: We cannot but protest against these injustices. See also help.Can1 and may1 are frequently but not always interchangeable in senses indicating possibility: A power failure can (or may ) occur at any time. Despite the insistence by some, that can means only to be able and may means to be permitted, both are regularly used in seeking or granting permission: Can (or May ) I borrow your glue gun? You can (or may ) use it tomorrow. Sentences using can occur chiefly in spoken English. May in this sense occurs more frequently in formal contexts: May I address the court, Your Honor? In negative constructions, can't or cannot is more common than may not : You can't have it today. I need it myself. The contraction mayn't is rare.Origin of can1First recorded before 900; Middle English, Old English, present indicative singular 1st, 3rd person of cunnan to know, know how; cognate with German, Old Norse, Gothic kann; ken, know 1Origin of can2First recorded before 1000; Middle English canne, can(e), Old English canne, cognate with German Kanne, Old Norse kanna, all perhaps from West Germanic; compare Late Latin canna small vesselOrigin of can1Old English canne; related to Old Norse, Old High German kanna, Irish gann, Swedish kana sledOrigin of can2Old English cunnan; related to Old Norse kunna, Old High German kunnan, Latin cognoscere to know, Sanskrit jñti he knows; see ken , uncouthExamples are provided to illustrate real-world usage of words in context. Any opinions expressed do not reflect the views of Dictionary.com.The judge then set a follow-up hearing for Jan. 22 so she could look over the pending paperwork and make a decision.A sharp decline in volatility last week could also have contributed to bitcoins latest falls, XTB research director Kathleen Brooks said in a note.Read more on The Wall Street JournalRecent models are pointing to warmer-than-expected temperatures in Europe, which could weigh on demand for gas, analysts at ANZ Research say.Read more on The Wall Street JournalSpread by midges, bluetongue poses no threat to the public or food safety but can affect cloven-hoofed animals like sheep and cattle.In Wood's absence, England could again go for an all-pace attack and bring Josh Tongue into the side.bottlebucketcanisterjarpackageDefinitions and idiom definitions from Dictionary.com Unabridged, based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary. Random House, Inc. 2023Idioms from The American Heritage Idioms Dictionary copyright 2002, 2001, 1995 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.camwoodCanaBrowse#aabbccddeeffgghhijklmmnnoppqrrsstuuvvwwxyyzAboutCareersContact usCookies, terms, & privacyHelpFollow usGet the Word of the Day every day! 2025 Dictionary.com, LLC modal verb Verb Formscannot cant past simple could could notcouldnt Idioms jump to other results used to say that it is possible for somebody/something to do something, or for something to happenI can run fast.Can you call back tomorrow?He couldn't answer the question.The stadium can be emptied in four minutes.I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can.Please let us know if you cannot attend the meeting. used to say that somebody knows how to do somethingShe can speak Spanish.Can you cook? could drive a car before I left school. used with the verbs feel, hear, see, smell, tasteShe could feel the warmth of the sun on her face.I can hear music.Grammar Point Talking about abilityTalking about abilityCan is used to say that somebody has the ability to do something because they have learned how to do it: Can is also used to talk about things you do with your senses, such as seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting:I can hear someone calling. Can is also used with passive infinitives to talk about what it is possible to do:The podcast can be downloaded here.Can or be able to is used to say that something is possible or that somebody has the opportunity to do something:Can you/are you able to come on Saturday?You use be able to to form the future and perfect tenses and the infinitive:You'll be able to get a taxi outside the station.I haven't been able to get much work done today.Shed love to be able to play the piano.Could is used to talk about what somebody was generally able to do in the past:Our daughter could walk when she was 9 months old.You use was/were able to or managed (but not could) when you are saying that something was possible on a particular occasion in the past:I was able to/managed to find some useful books in the library.I could find some useful books in the library. In negative sentences, could not can also be used:We weren't able to/didn't manage to/couldn't get there in time. Could is also used with this meaning with verbs of seeing, noticing, understanding, etc:I could see there was something wrong.Could have is used when you are saying that it was possible for somebody to do something in the past but they did not try:We could have won the game but decided to let them win. used to show that somebody is allowed to do somethingYou can take the car, if you want.We can't wear jeans at work.Topics Permission and obligationa2 used to ask permission to do somethingCan I read your newspaper?Can I take you home?Grammar Point Talking about permissionTalking about permissionCan and cannot (or cant) are the most common words used for asking for, giving or refusing permission:Can I borrow your bike?You can come with us if you want to.You cant park your car there.May (negative may not) is used as a polite and fairly formal way to ask for, give or refuse permission:May I borrow your pen?You may come if you wish. It is often used in official signs and rules:Visitors may use the swimming pool between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.Students may not use the college car park. The form maynt is hardly ever used in modern English. used to ask somebody to help youCan you help me with this box?Can you feed the cat, please? used to make suggestionsWe can eat in a restaurant, if you like.I can take the car if necessary.Topics Suggestions and advicea2 used in the negative for saying that you are sure something is not trueThat can't be Maryshe's in New York.He can't have slept through all that noise.Topics Doubt, guessing and certaintyb1 used to express doubt or surpriseWhat can they be doing?Can he be serious?Where can she have put it? used to say what somebody/something is often likeHe can be very tactless sometimes.It can be quite cold here in winter. (informal) used to say that somebody must do something, usually when you are angryYou can shut up or get out!Grammar Point Modal verbsModal verbsThe modal verbs are can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will and would. Dare, need, have to and used to also share some of the features of modal verbs.Modal verbs have only one form. They have no -ing or -ed forms and do not add -s to the 3rd person singular form:He can speak three languages.She will try and visit tomorrow.Modal verbs are followed by the infinitive of another verb without to. The exceptions are ought to, have to and used to:You must find a job.At your age you ought to know better.I used to work there too.Questions are formed without do/does in the present, or did in the past:Can I invite Mary?Should I have invited Mary?Negative sentences are formed with not or the short form -nt and do not use do/does or did:it may not be anything to worry about.You shouldn't say a word to her about it.You will find more help with how to use modal verbs at the dictionary entries for each verb. Word OriginOld English cunnan know (in Middle English know how to), related to Dutch kunnen and German knnen; from an Indo-European root shared by Latin gnoscere know and Greek gignskein know. Idioms as happy, simple, sweet, etc. as can be as happy, etc. as possible cant be doing with somebody/something | can't be doing with somebody doing something (informal) used to say that you do not like something and are unwilling to accept itI can't be doing with people who complain all the time.I cant be doing with you moaning all the time. (informal) used to say that you are not able or willing to do somethingSorry, no can do. I just don't have the time. See can in the Oxford Advanced American DictionarySee can in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English

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