

ABILITY: CAN, COULD & BE ABLE TO

When we say that somebody or something has or doesn't have the ability to do something, we can use **can**(or **cannot**)→ for the present
or **could** (n't) → for the past.

- *He can play five musical instruments.*
- *We can't afford to pay the bill.*
- *Ann could swim before she was three years old.*

We can use **be able to** instead of **can/ could** to talk about an ability that somebody has or had:

- *Helen can / is able to read well, although she's only three.*

In general, we use **be able to** when we talk about an specific achievement (particularly if it is difficult, requiring some effort) rather than a general ability. Study this table:

	<i>General ability</i>	<i>Specific achievement</i>
<i>present</i>	We prefer can (but can also use be able to) - <i>He <u>can</u> speak Spanish</i>	We prefer be able to (but can also use can): - <i>He has now recovered from his injury and <u>is able to</u> drive again.</i>
<i>past</i>	We prefer could (but can also be able to): - <i>After only six months, Patsy <u>could</u> play the violin quite well.</i>	We use be able to (not could): - <i>Jenny <u>was able to</u> leave the hospital only six hours after her operation.</i>

We commonly use **can** or **could**, when we are using verbs of the **senses**, *see, hear, smell, taste, feel*, and with verbs of "thinking", e.g. *believe, decide, remember, understand*:

- *She could feel the cold on her face as she left home.*
- *I can't decide where to go for my holidays.*

We don't use **be able to** when we talk about something that is happening as we are speaking.



Look, I can ski

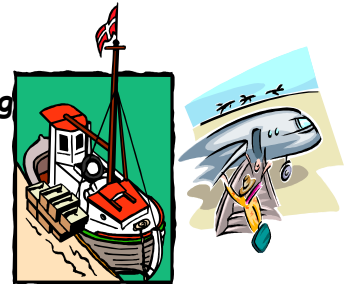
We use **be able to**, not **can** or **could**, if the idea we want to express needs

- to-infinitive → *I'd like to be able to climb in the Alps.*
- an -ing form → *She travelled all over the world without being able to speak any foreign language.*
- a perfect tense → *She has been able to use computers since she was a little girl.*
- it follows another modal verb → *You must be able to speak English quite fluently.*
- future → *When you are 18, you'll be able to drive.*

1. Choose can, could or be able to (or negative forms) to complete.
- Peter has a computer that can/is able to fit into his pocket.
 - I had some free time yesterday, so I was able to write a few letters.
 - From where we're standing, this land belongs to me for as far as you can/are able to see.
 - My teacher has given me a translation to do for homework, but I can't/'m not able to understand it.
 - Watch this, Mum; I can stand on one leg.
 - "When's her birthday?" "As far as I can remember, it's in June".
 - The plans were destroyed before they could be read by the invading army.
 - When I was younger I was hopeless at sports. I couldn't/wasn't able to throw or kick a ball properly.

2. Complete these sentences with could or was/were able to. In one of each pair you can use either, so write them both. In the other it is more appropriate only to use was/were able to.

- Despite yesterday's snowfalls, we were able to drive home in less than an hour.
 - I only lived a mile from the office and could/was able to drive to work in less than an hour.
- When she was the manager of the company she could/was able to take holidays when she wanted to.
 - I was very busy at work, but I was able to take a short holiday over Christmas.
- In the 16th century, fishermen could/were able to smuggle wine into the country without fear of being caught by the authorities.
 - Martin was able to smuggle the knife on board without being detected by the security system.



3. Complete these sentences with can followed by one of the verbs below. If it is inappropriate to use can, use a form of be able to instead.

count	find	give	investigate	meet	start	work
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- We don't seem to be able to find your letter in our files.
- You can count on me to help with the party.
- You can give me a call at home.
- The builders said that they may be able to start work today.
- When the satellite is launched next week, scientists will be able to investigate the Mars in more detail than ever before.
- I doubt that he will be able to work again; his injuries are so severe.
- We can meet outside the cinema, if that's OK with you.