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Grammar Reference

Can

“Can” is used to say that somebody has the ability to do something or that something is possible or allowed.

Example:

We **can see** the river from our apartment.

I **can come** and see her tomorrow.

The word “exercise” **can be** a noun or a verb.

The negative is can’t (cannot):

I **cannot speak** Japanese well.

Form:

Subject + can (can’t/cannot) + verb (base form) + ...

Be able to

“Be able to” is also used to say that somebody has the ability to do something, similarly to “can”, but “can” is more common.

Example:

We **are able to see** the river from our apartment

I’m able to come and see her tomorrow.

I’m not able to speak Japanese well.

Form:

Subject + be able to + verb (base form) + ...

Note: “Can” has only two forms: can (present) and could (past), so sometimes it is necessary to use “be able to”.

Example:

I can’t sleep.
recently.

I haven’t been able to sleep

He can come tomorrow.
tomorrow.

He might be able to come

Could

“Could” is sometimes the past of “can”. “Could” is especially used with verbs like: *see, hear, smell, taste, feel, remember, and understand*.

Example:

We had a nice room in the hotel. We **could see** the river.

When I entered the room, I **could smell** gas.

Note: We also use “could” to say that someone had the general ability or permission to do something.

Example:

My grandmother **could speak** three languages.

We were totally free. We **could do** whatever we wanted. (We were allowed to do.)

Could and was able to

“Could” is used for general ability. “Was/were able to” or “managed to” is used to say that somebody had the ability to do something and did it in a specific situation.

Example:

The fire spread through the building very quickly, but everyone **was able to** escape / **managed to** escape. (NOT could escape)

We didn't know where David was, but we managed to find / were able to find him in the end. (NOT could find)

Compare:

David was an excellent badminton player when he was younger. He could beat anybody. (= he had the general ability to beat anybody)

David and Linda played a match yesterday. David played well, but Linda managed to / was able to beat him. (= Linda managed to beat David this time.)

Note: The negative “couldn't” can be used in all situations.

My grandfather couldn't drive.

We looked for David everywhere, but we couldn't find him.