

136 can and be able: forms

can is used here in conjunction with be +- the adjective able, which supplies the missing parts of can and provides an alternative form for the present and past tense. We have therefore the following forms:

Infinitive: to be able Past participle: been able

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|-------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------------|---------|------|
| Affirmative | Negative | Interrogative | | | |
| Future | will/shall | will/shall not | shall/will I be able? | be able | will |
| | he be able? etc. | | | | |

Present can or cannot or can I? or
am able am not able am I able? etc.

Past could or could not or could I? or
was able was not able was I able? etc.

There is only one future form, for can is not used in the future except • to express permission.

In the conditional, however, we have two forms:

could and would be able.

All other tenses are formed with be able according to the rules for ordinary verbs:

Present perfect: have been able

Past perfect: had been able •[Negative interrogative: could you
not/couldn't you? were you not/were you?] you able? will you not/won't you be able? etc.

can/be/will/shall not and have can be contracted in the usual way: | I wasn't able, he won't be able. I've been able. can is followed by the bare infinitive. be able is followed by the full infinitive.

137 can/am able, could/was able

A can and be able

1 shall/will be able is the only future form:

Our baby will be able to walk in a few weeks.

Either **can** or **am able** may be used in the present, **can** is the more usual:

Can you/Are you able to type?

I can't pay you today. Can you wait till tomorrow? or

Could you wait? (request; see B2 below)

For the present perfect, however, we must use the be able form:

Since his accident he hasn't been able to leave the house.

B could

could can be used with a present meaning when there is an idea of condition:

Could you run the business by yourself? (if this was necessary)

Could he get another job? (if he left this one)

I could get you a copy. (if you want one)

In the first two examples **could** is replaceable by **would be able**.

could you? is a very good way of introducing a request. It is an alternative to would you? and a little more polite:

Could you show me the way/lend me £5/wait half an hour?

Could you please send me an application form?

couldn't you? is also useful:

HOUSEHOLDER: Could you come and mend a leak in a pipe?

PLUMBER: Would sometime next month suit you?

HOUSEHOLDER: Couldn't you come a little earlier?

Could and **was able** used for past ability

For ability only, either can be used:

When I was young I could/was able to climb any tree in the forest.

For ability + particular action, use **was able**:

Although the pilot was badly hurt he was able to explain what had happened. (He could and did explain.)

*The boat capsized quite near the bank so the children were able to swim to safety.
(They could and did swim.)*

This rule, however, is relaxed in the negative when the action did not take place, and with verbs of the senses:

*He read the message but he couldn't/wasn't able to understand it.
I could/was able to see him through the window.*

had been able is the past perfect form:

He said he had lost his passport and hadn't been able to leave the country.
(For could in reported speech, see 312.)

138 **could + perfect infinitive**

A This form is used for past ability when the action was not performed:

I could have lent you the money. Why didn't you ask me? (see also 154)

or when we don't know whether it was performed or not:

*The money has disappeared! Who could have taken it?
Tom could have (taken it); he was here alone yesterday.*

Compare:

He was able to send a message. (He sent it.)

He could have sent a message. (He didn't send it or we don't know whether he sent it or not. See also 135.)

B **could + perfect infinitive** can also express irritation at or reproach for the non-performance of an action:

You could have told me = I am annoyed/disappointed that you didn't tell me. You should have told me.

There would be a strong stress on the word the speaker wishes to emphasize. (For **might** used in the same way, see 285.)