

# Can: further information

## Introduction



Birds **can** fly.

## Uses

| Use         | Examples  |
|-------------|---|
| Ability     | <p>She <b>can</b> speak four languages.</p> <p>Her arm is broken so she <b>can't</b> play tennis at the moment.</p> <p><b>Can</b> you swim?</p>                   |
| Possibility | <p>Sorry, I <b>can't</b> meet you today - I'm too busy. But I <b>can</b> see you tomorrow.</p> <p><b>Can</b> you work on Saturday? - Rachel's on holiday.</p>     |
| Permission  | <p>'Can I leave early today?' 'Yes, you <b>can</b>, no problem.'</p> <p>You <b>can't</b> watch TV until you have done your homework.</p>                          |
| Requests    | <p><b>Can</b> I have the tomato soup followed by the steak?</p> <p><b>Can</b> you help me with this?</p> <p><b>Can</b> you tell me how to get to the station?</p> |

## Offers

Hello, **can** I help you?

**Can** we give you a lift to the station?

Deduction - **can't**. We may be certain or just believe that something is true.

You **can't** be cold - it's 30° and you're wearing a coat.

It **can't** be easy with four young children and a full-time job - how do you manage?

## The present continuous

**Can** can also be followed by the **present continuous** when making deductions or requests. For example:

They **can't** be having lunch now; it's half past two.

Gilbert **can't** be taking the train to the airport tomorrow - there's a strike. He **must** be driving. [present continuous for future plans]

**Can** you be preparing the vegetables while I'm making the dessert? [informal]

## Examples



**Can** you be working on this while I go back to the office and look at the sales figures?



It **can't** be perfume - it's too light. And it **can't** be something to wear because it's too small.



Mathieu **can't** be calling me - he's on holiday.

## Some common expressions

| Expression                                 | Meaning   | Examples   |
|--|---|--|
| ' <b>can't</b> help' + <b>gerund</b> /'it' | Used to talk about something we <b>can't</b> prevent or stop ourselves doing.                   | I know it's a bad habit but I <b>can't</b> help laughing when I'm nervous.<br><br>"You eat too much chocolate."<br>"I know - I just <b>can't</b> help it!" |
| It <b>can't</b> be helped.                 | Used to accept that something <b>can't</b> be avoided or prevented - it is outside our control. | "Sorry, I'm not going to get to the meeting - I'm stuck in traffic."<br>"Don't worry - it <b>can't</b> be helped. I'll update you tomorrow."               |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| subject + ' <b>can't</b> believe' + object                                    | To express great surprise.   | "I passed my exam!"<br>"I <b>can't</b> believe it - you didn't work very hard!"<br><br>I <b>can't</b> believe what I heard this morning - Jenny has been promoted.                                   |
| subject + ' <b>can't</b> be bothered' (+ <b>infinitive</b> or <b>gerund</b> ) | Used to express a lack of motivation - informal.   | I should call Tom this afternoon but I <b>can't</b> be bothered.<br><br>We need some more sugar but I <b>can't</b> be bothered to go/ going out for some so I'm drinking my coffee without it today. |
| No <b>can</b> do.   | A way to say that we <b>cannot</b> do something we have been asked to - it isn't possible. [informal]    | " <b>Can</b> we meet again next Friday?"<br>"Sorry, no <b>can</b> do. How about Monday?"   |
| subject + ' <b>can't</b> stand/bear' + <b>gerund/object</b>                   | Used to express a strong dislike. An alternative to 'hate'. [informal]                                   | I <b>can't</b> stand people who are late for meetings.<br><br>I <b>can't</b> bear waiting for exam results.  |
| <b>Can't</b> complain.  | A response to questions like "How are you?" that means everything is ok - not great, but not bad either. | "Hi, how are things with you?"<br>"Oh, not bad, <b>can't</b> complain."  |

subject + '**can** always' +  
**bare infinitive**

**Note that** 'always' does  
not have its usual  
meaning in this  
expression.

To make an offer - often  
an easy option or a  
contingency plan.

"I'm coming to London in  
August but the hotels  
are so expensive. Maybe  
I'll try a hostel."

"Well, don't worry. You  
**can** always stay at my  
place if you want - it's  
not in the centre but  
there's a good train  
service."

"My son's just started a  
new job. He's enjoying it  
but there's a lot to  
learn."

"Tell him he **can** always  
call me if he needs some  
advice."

## 'To be able to'

This is used in different ways:

| Use  | Examples  |
|--|---|
| As an alternative to <b>can</b> for ability or possibility in the present tense. | <p>I'm usually <b>able to</b> take 3 weeks holiday in August.</p> <p>We're <b>able to</b> see the coast of France on a clear day.</p> |
| When <b>could</b> cannot be used in the past tense. [See note 3. below]          | I <b>was</b> finally <b>able to</b> have a meeting with them last week.   |

When **can** is not possible - as an infinitive or gerund, when we talk about the **future** and with **modal auxiliary verbs**, '**used to**' and **perfect tenses**.

It's important **to be able to** swim.

I **must be able to** speak fluent English before I go to London.

I **can't** finish the report today but I'll **be able to** do it tomorrow.

I've **been able to** swim since I was three.

I've been trying to call her but I haven't **been able to** get through.

**Have** you always **been able to** speak Spanish?

I've never **been able to** sing.

Until I lived in London, I'd never **been able to** understand English slang. When I started this job, I'd **been able to** drive lorries for five years. **Being able to** communicate effectively is essential in this job.

I **used to be able to** ride a bike but I **can't** now.

## Note that

1. In the **present simple** and whenever there is a choice, **can** is usually preferred.
2. We avoid 'to be able to' when something is happening at the moment:

"Look at me - I **can** dance like Shakira!"

and with passives:

Meetings **can** only be held on Fridays.

3. There is a difference between using **could** and 'was able to' - see **could** for an explanation.

## 'To can'

**There is a verb 'to can', which has a completely different meaning to the modal auxiliary verb. The definition is:**

**To put food or drink into a metal container in order to preserve it. For example:**

**It is safe to can vegetables without adding salt.**

**Canning fruit might affect its colour.**



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