

Can: further information

Introduction



Birds **can** fly.

Uses

Use	Examples
Ability	<p>She can speak four languages.</p> <p>Her arm is broken so she can't play tennis at the moment.</p> <p>Can you swim?</p>
Possibility	<p>Sorry, I can't meet you today - I'm too busy. But I can see you tomorrow.</p> <p>Can you work on Saturday? - Rachel's on holiday.</p>
Permission	<p>'Can I leave early today?' 'Yes, you can, no problem.'</p> <p>You can't watch TV until you have done your homework.</p>
Requests	<p>Can I have the tomato soup followed by the steak?</p> <p>Can you help me with this?</p> <p>Can 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
' can't help' + gerund /'it'	Used to talk about something we can't prevent or stop ourselves doing.	I know it's a bad habit but I can't help laughing when I'm nervous. "You eat too much chocolate." "I know - I just can't help it!"
It can't be helped.	Used to accept that something can't be avoided or prevented - it is outside our control.	"Sorry, I'm not going to get to the meeting - I'm stuck in traffic." "Don't worry - it can't be helped. I'll update you tomorrow."

subject + ' can't believe' + object	To express great surprise.	"I passed my exam!" "I can't believe it - you didn't work very hard!" I can't believe what I heard this morning - Jenny has been promoted.
subject + ' can't be bothered' (+ infinitive or gerund)	Used to express a lack of motivation - informal.	I should call Tom this afternoon but I can't be bothered. We need some more sugar but I can't be bothered to go/ going out for some so I'm drinking my coffee without it today.
No can do.	A way to say that we cannot do something we have been asked to - it isn't possible. [informal]	" Can we meet again next Friday?" "Sorry, no can do. How about Monday?"
subject + ' can't stand/bear' + gerund/object	Used to express a strong dislike. An alternative to 'hate'. [informal]	I can't stand people who are late for meetings. I can't bear waiting for exam results.
Can't 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?" "Oh, not bad, can't 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 can for ability or possibility in the present tense.	<p>I'm usually able to take 3 weeks holiday in August.</p> <p>We're able to see the coast of France on a clear day.</p>
When could cannot be used in the past tense. [See note 3. below]	I was finally able to 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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