

# 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' + gerund/'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.  "You eat too much chocolate." "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." "Don't worry - it <b>can't</b> be helped. I'll update you tomorrow."

<p>subject + '<b>can't believe</b>' + object</p>	<p>To express great surprise.</p>	<p>"I passed my exam!" "I <b>can't</b> believe it - you didn't work very hard!"</p> <p>I <b>can't</b> believe what I heard this morning - Jenny has been promoted.</p>
<p>subject + '<b>can't be bothered</b>' (+ <b>infinitive</b> or <b>gerund</b>)</p>	<p>Used to express a lack of motivation - informal.</p>	<p>I should call Tom this afternoon but I <b>can't</b> be bothered.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>No <b>can do</b>.</p>	<p>A way to say that we <b>cannot</b> do something we have been asked to - it isn't possible. [informal]</p>	<p>"<b>Can</b> we meet again next Friday?" "Sorry, no <b>can do</b>. How about Monday?"</p>
<p>subject + '<b>can't stand/bear</b>' + <b>gerund/object</b></p>	<p>Used to express a strong dislike. An alternative to 'hate'. [informal]</p>	<p>I <b>can't</b> stand people who are late for meetings.</p> <p>I <b>can't</b> bear waiting for exam results.</p>
<p><b>Can't complain</b>.</p>	<p>A response to questions like "How are you?" that means everything is ok - not great, but not bad either.</p>	<p>"Hi, how are things with you?" "Oh, not bad, <b>can't</b> complain."</p>

subject + 'can always' + bare infinitive

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."

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

"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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