

# Can: further information

## Introduction



**Birds can fly.**

## Uses

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

<b>subject + 'can't believe' + object</b>	To express great surprise.	"I passed my exam!" "I <b>can't</b> believe it - you didn't work very hard!"  I <b>can't</b> believe what I heard this morning - Jenny has been promoted.
<b>subject + 'can't be bothered' (+ infinitive or gerund)</b>	Used to express a lack of motivation - informal.	I should call Tom this afternoon but I <b>can't</b> be bothered.  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.
<b>No can do.</b>	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?" "Sorry, no <b>can</b> do. How about Monday?"
<b>subject + 'can't stand/bear' + 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.  I <b>can't</b> bear waiting for exam results.
<b>Can't complain.</b>	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, <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.	I'm usually <b>able to</b> take 3 weeks holiday in August.  We're <b>able to</b> see the coast of France on a clear day.
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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