

# To be able to

## Introduction



Birds **are able to** fly.

## Definition

**To be able to** is a structure which is sometimes used as an alternative to the modal auxiliary verb **can**.

## Construction

**Affirmative:**      subject + 'be able to' + **bare infinitive**  
                             I **am able to** swim.

**Negative:**         subject + 'be' + 'not' + 'able to' + **bare infinitive**  
                             I **am not able to** swim.

**Interrogative:**   'be' + subject + 'able to' + **bare infinitive**  
                             **Are you able to** swim?

## Uses

Use	Examples
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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 <b>can</b> is not possible - as an infinitive or gerund, when we talk about the future and with modal auxiliary verbs	<p>It's important <b>to be able to</b> swim.</p> <p>I <b>must be able to</b> speak fluent English before I go to London.</p> <p>I <b>can't</b> finish the report today but I'll <b>be able to</b> do it tomorrow.</p>

### Note that

1. In the **present simple** and when 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!"
3. There is a difference between using **could** and 'was able to' - see **could** for an explanation.

## Examples



After taking lessons, Camille **is able to** swim underwater.



I had a problem with my car yesterday but, fortunately, I **was able to** get a taxi to the airport.



"It's useful in my job **to be able to** write in English."

**"Being able to** speak English is more important in my department."



"Can you come to my office later to discuss this?"

"I **might be able to**. I'll call you later to confirm."



Oh, no not again! I hope I'll **be able to** fix it before tomorrow!

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