

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 can for ability or possibility in the present tense | I'm usually able to take 3 weeks holiday in August. We're able to see the coast of France on a clear day. |
| 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 | 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. |

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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Last update: 2023/02/14 14:21

