

Usage

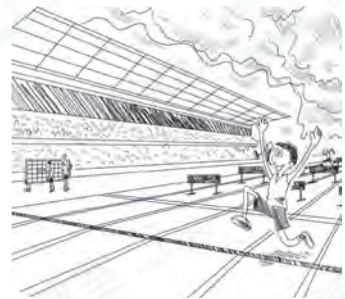
We use modal verbs like *can*, *could*, *may* and *would* to:

1. talk about ability.

e.g. The athlete **can** finish a 100-meter dash in 9.9 seconds.

2. ask for or give permission.

e.g. Student: **May** I go to the washroom, Miss Chan?
Miss Chan: Yes, you **may**.



3. make requests.

e.g. Boss: **Could** you give me the report before noon?
Secretary: Certainly.



Educator's Tips



We use the base form of a verb after a modal verb.

e.g. Jeffery ~~can~~ **eat** ten pancakes in a meal.

We do not change the form of modal verbs to make tenses, but some of them can be used to refer to past time.

e.g. Mum ~~could~~ **could** dance well ten years ago.





Part 1 Talking about Ability

We use the modal verbs **can** and **could** to talk about ability. We use **can** to talk about ability in the present and we use **could** to talk about ability in the past.

Statement	
In the present	In the past
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can use chopsticks well. Dad cannot / can't drive a car. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I could walk when I was three. My sister could not / couldn't tie her shoelaces when she was a baby.

Question			Short answer
Can	the postmen	finish their work?	Yes, they can .
			No, they cannot / can't .
Could	the swimmer	get a gold medal?	Yes, he could .
			No, he could not / couldn't .



Educator's Tips

We can also use *be able to* to talk about ability.

e.g. The clerk **is able to** type 100 Chinese characters in one minute.
(= The clerk **can** type 100 Chinese characters in one minute.)

e.g. The student **was not able to** get a pass in the English exam.
(= The student **could not** get a pass in the English exam.)

Exercise 1

Underline the correct words in brackets.

- Albert is too old. He (cannot / could not) run for three hours continuously.
- Sally was a smart girl. She (can / could) get full marks in tests without studying.
- The new stadium (was able to / is able to) accommodate 30,000 people.
- Bobby cried very hard yesterday. He (was not able to / cannot) find his way home.
- When I was a boy, I (couldn't / am able to) reach the top of the shelf.
- Thomas: Could Germany get the championship in the World Cup?
Stephen: Yes, it (could / can).



Part 2 Asking for Permission

We use the modal verbs **can**, **could** and **may** to ask someone to let us do certain things. Using **may** to ask for permission is more formal than using **could** and **can**.

Less formal

More formal

Asking for permission			Giving permission	Refusing permission
Can	I	play online games?	Yes, you can . / Certainly. / Of course. / No problem. / Sure. / OK.	No, you cannot (can't) . / I'm afraid not. / Of course not. / Certainly not.
Could	we	borrow your notes?		
May	I	take sick leave today?	Yes, you may . / Certainly. / Of course. / No problem. / Sure. / OK.	No, you may not . / I'm afraid not. / Of course not. / Certainly not.



Educator's Tips



When asking for permission, we usually use **can**, **could** and **may** with the pronouns **I** and **we**.

e.g. **Can / Could / May I / we** enter the laboratory?

Exercise 2

Complete the conversations with 'can', 'could' or 'may'. Use the negative form if necessary.

1. Student: May I go to the toilet?

Teacher: Yes, you _____.



2. Ernest: Hey, _____ I use your mobile phone?

Beth: Yes, you _____. It's on the table.



3. Dave: Good morning. We are **conducting** a survey on people's reading habits. _____ I ask you a few questions?

Lucy: No, you _____. I'm in a hurry.



4. Sue: Dad, _____ I **hang out** with my friends now?

Dad: Yes, you _____.



Vocabulary:

conduct (v.): to organise and / or do a particular activity

hang out (phr.): to spend a lot of time in a place or with someone



Part 3 Making Requests

We use the modal verbs **can**, **could** and **would** to ask for something or ask someone to do something for us.

Making a request			Accepting a request	Refusing a request
Less formal ↓ More formal	Can	you	Certainly. / Of course. / Sure. / No problem. / OK.	I'm sorry, I can't. I am doing revision now.
	Could	I		I'm afraid not. The card machine is out of order.
	Would	you		I'm sorry, I need to see Miss Wong now.



Educator's Tips



When making a request, we use:

- can* and *could* with the pronouns *I*, *we* and *you*.
e.g. *Can / Could I / we / you go in first?*
- would* with the pronoun *you*.
e.g. *Would you switch on the air-con, please?*



Exercise 3

Complete the conversations by underlining the correct words in brackets.

- Sophia: Daniel, **(a)** (could / would) you fill in this form for me?
Daniel: **(b)** (Certainly / I'm sorry, I can't). I need to go to the homework class now.
Sophia: It's ok. I will ask someone else. Mr Pan, **(c)** (can / would) you help me, please?
Mr Pan: **(d)** (Sure / I'm afraid not). I'm happy to help.
Sophia: Thank you. **(e)** (Can / Would) you return the form to me before 5:00 pm?
Mr Pan: **(f)** (No problem / I'm sorry, I can't). I will fill it in now.

- Jessica: Dad, **(a)** (can / would) I have a new dress?
Dad: **(b)** (Of course / I'm afraid not). Your test result is good. You deserve a prize.
Jessica: Thanks! **(c)** (Can / Would) we go to the mall by car?
Dad: **(d)** (No problem / I'm afraid not). The car has broken down.

3. Customer: This shirt is too small. **(a)** (Could / Can) you give me a bigger one?
 Salesperson: **(b)** (OK / I'm sorry, I can't). This shirt has one size only.
 Customer: How about this dress? **(c)** (Could / Would) I have a size 12?
 Salesperson: **(d)** (Certainly / I'm afraid not). Here you are.
 Customer: I'm not a member. **(e)** (Could / Would) I get a discount?
 Salesperson: **(f)** (Sure / I'm afraid not). We give a discount to our members only.

Unit Recap

Jim and his son, Kyle, are having dinner in a restaurant. Complete their conversation with the correct form of 'can', 'could', 'may', 'would' or other proper responses.

Jim: **(1)** ^{Could} _____ we sit at that table by the window?

Waiter: **(2)** ^{I'm sorry / I'm afraid not} _____. The table has been reserved. Let me show you to another one.

(Jim and Kyle sit down) **(3)** _____ I take your order?

Jim: Yes, you **(4)** _____. I'll have steak and chips. Kyle, what about you?

Kyle: Daddy, **(5)** _____ I have a hamburger, a fried chicken and beef noodles?

Jim: No, you **(6)** _____. That's too much. I don't think you **(7)** _____ finish it all. I'll order a kids' meal for you.

Waiter: **(8)** _____ you order your drinks now, sir?

Jim: **(9)** _____. A cup of coffee for me.

Kyle: **(10)** _____ I have a coke, Daddy?

Jim: Yes, you **(11)** _____. Waiter, **(12)** _____ you tell me where the washroom is?

Waiter: It's just around the corner. *(Jim leaves the table)*

Kyle: Waiter, **(13)** _____ I have a hamburger and a fried chicken as well?

Waiter: **(14)** _____. Your father will not like this idea!

