

## CAN

Can is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use can to:

- talk about possibility and ability in the **present**
- make requests or orders
- ask for or give permission

The main verb is always the bare infinitive (infinitive without *to*).

	subject	auxiliary verb <i>can</i>	main verb	
+	I	can	play	tennis.
-	He	cannot	play	tennis.
		can't		
?	Can	you	play	tennis?

Notice that:

- **Can** is invariable. There is only one form: **can**
- The **main verb** is always the **bare infinitive**.

## COULD

Could is an auxiliary verb, a modal auxiliary verb. We use could to:

- talk about possibility or ability in the **past**
- make requests

We use **I** (positive) and **couldn't** (negative) for general ability in the past. But when we talk about one special occasion in the past, we use **be able to** (positive) and **couldn't** (negative). Look at these examples:

		past	
		general	specific occasion
+	My grandmother <b>could</b> speak Spanish.	A man fell into the river yesterday. The police <b>were able to</b> save him.	
-	My grandmother <b>couldn't</b> speak Spanish.	A man fell into the river yesterday. The police <b>couldn't</b> save him.	

## BE ABLE TO-INFINITIVE

Although we look at **be able to** here, it is **not** a modal verb. It is simply the verb **be** plus an adjective (able) followed by the infinitive. We look at **be able to** here because we sometimes use it instead of **can** and **could**.

We use **be able to**:

- to talk about ability in **all tenses**

We use be able to to express ability. "Able" is an **adjective** meaning: **having the power, skill or means to do something**. If we say "I am able to swim", it is like saying "I can swim". We sometimes use be able to instead of "can" or "could" for ability. Be able to is **possible in all tenses** - but "can" is possible only in the present and "could" is possible only in the past for ability. In addition, "can" and "could" have no infinitive form. So we use be able to when we want to use other tenses or the infinitive.