

# 09

## Can, could, and would Ability

- 1 Some examples of **can** and **could**:  
*She **can** play the guitar and the piano.*  
*She **couldn't** go to work yesterday.*

2 Forms of **can**:

**POSITIVE**

**can + verb**

*I **can** swim quite well.*

**NEGATIVE**

**cannot/can't + verb**

*We **can't** afford a new car.*

**QUESTIONS**

**can + subject + verb**

***Can** you speak any other languages?*

3 We use **can** and **can't** for the present and the future:

*I **can't** talk to you now.*

*I **can** do it tomorrow.*

4 We use **could** and **couldn't** for the past:

*He **could** drive at the age of 17.*

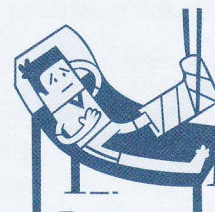
*It was so hot that I **couldn't** breathe.*

### Grammar in action

- 1 We use **can** and **can't** to talk or ask about the ability to do something, in general or at a particular moment in time:



*He **can't** play football very well.*



*He **can't** play football this month.*

- 2 We use **can/can't** or **will/won't be able to** to say that something will/won't be possible in the future. Here someone is discussing a future arrangement:  
*I can see you on Friday but I **can't** see you on Saturday.*  
*I'll be able to see you on Friday but I **won't** be able to see you on Saturday.*

- 3 We use **could** and **couldn't** to talk about past abilities in general:

*She **could** play the piano when she was young but she **couldn't** play the guitar.*

We usually use **was/were able to** or **managed to** (NOT **could**) to talk about being able to do something successfully at a particular time in the past. This might be to describe something that was difficult to do:

*After several days, the climbers **were able to** get / **managed to** get to the top of the mountain.*

- 4 We use **couldn't** to say that something was impossible for someone in the past:

*He was listening to music on headphones and he **couldn't** hear me.*

### A The lost key

Complete this phone conversation using **can**, **can't** or **couldn't** and the words in brackets.

JUDY Hi, Frank, can you hear<sup>0</sup> (you/hear) me?

FRANK Well, .....<sup>1</sup> (I/hear) you very well, there's something wrong with your phone. Where are you?

JUDY I'm outside the house. ....<sup>2</sup> (I/get) in because .....<sup>3</sup> (I/find) the key.

FRANK .....<sup>4</sup> (you/speak up)? .....<sup>5</sup> (I/hear) what you said.

JUDY .....<sup>6</sup> (I/open) the door!!!

FRANK .....<sup>7</sup> (you/remember) when you last had the key?

JUDY .....<sup>8</sup> (I/remember) putting it in my pocket this morning. But when I got home a few minutes ago, .....<sup>9</sup> (I/find) it.

FRANK How did you lose it?

JUDY I don't know. ....<sup>10</sup> (I/explain) it.

FRANK OK. ....<sup>11</sup> (you/wait) there? .....<sup>12</sup> (I/drive) over there now and .....<sup>13</sup> (I/open) the door for you.



## B Language ability

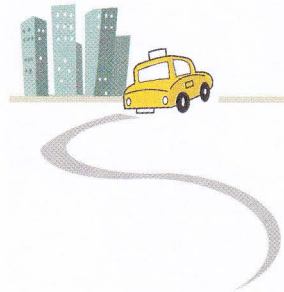
Complete this description of a personal experience using *can*, *can't*, *could* or *couldn't* and the verbs in brackets.

I can remember<sup>0</sup> (remember) my first year of living in this country very clearly. When I first arrived here, I .....<sup>1</sup> (speak) the language very well. I .....<sup>2</sup> (understand) a few words and phrases and I .....<sup>3</sup> (go) shopping but I .....<sup>4</sup> (have) real conversations with people. Then I took a course and now I .....<sup>5</sup> (speak) the language quite well. I .....<sup>6</sup> (make) friends and I .....<sup>7</sup> (do) most things I want to do. Sometimes I .....<sup>8</sup> (remember) certain words but usually I .....<sup>9</sup> (think of) the right word and people .....<sup>10</sup> (understand) what I'm saying.

## C Possibilities for the game tomorrow

Complete this conversation using *can/can't* or *will/won't be able to* and the words in brackets. Put two answers into a gap if this is possible.

JAMES Can you go / Will you be able to go<sup>0</sup> (you/go) to the game tomorrow?  
PAUL Yes, .....<sup>1</sup> (I/go) and I'm looking forward to it.  
JAMES .....<sup>2</sup> (we/discuss) our plans for going to the game now?  
PAUL Yes, of course. I'm sure .....<sup>3</sup> (we/arrange) everything now.  
JAMES OK. ....<sup>4</sup> (we/go) in your car tomorrow night?  
.....<sup>5</sup> (We/use) my car because it isn't working.  
PAUL Oh, .....<sup>6</sup> (you/borrow) your father's car?  
JAMES No, .....<sup>7</sup> (he/lend) it to me because he needs it then.  
PAUL .....<sup>8</sup> (we/get) there on public transport?  
JAMES Well, .....<sup>9</sup> (we/take) a train that goes all the way but .....<sup>10</sup> (we/get) one that stops near the stadium.  
.....<sup>11</sup> (I/look up) the train details on the internet now.  
PAUL Oh, .....<sup>12</sup> (you/do) that now? That's great.  
JAMES Yeah, and .....<sup>13</sup> (I/phone) you back later and .....<sup>14</sup> (I/tell) you the best plan then.



## D Problems on the trip

Complete this description of a trip using *were able to*, *managed to* or *couldn't* and the verbs in brackets.

We had some bad problems on our trip. First of all, we couldn't get<sup>0</sup> (get) a taxi to the airport because they were all busy. We rang lots of numbers and eventually we .....<sup>1</sup> (get) one and we .....<sup>2</sup> (arrive) at the airport just in time. When we arrived at the other end, we .....<sup>3</sup> (find) a trolley for all our bags but we .....<sup>4</sup> (carry) them to the bus. We .....<sup>5</sup> (find) our hotel without any problems so that was good. The next day, we .....<sup>6</sup> (book) a tour of the city and we .....<sup>7</sup> (see) all the famous sights. Unfortunately, we .....<sup>8</sup> (take) any photos because the camera wasn't working. The next day, I .....<sup>9</sup> (get) any money because I .....<sup>10</sup> (use) my card in any of the cash machines. After several hours, we .....<sup>11</sup> (find) a bank which accepted my card, which was lucky. At the end of the trip, we .....<sup>12</sup> (come) home without any problems, I'm pleased to say!



5 We use **can, could, may, and would** in questions:

- Can I help you?*
- Could I borrow your pen, please?*
- May I ask a question?*
- Could you phone back later?*
- Would you wait for a moment, please?*

6 We use **can/can't** and **be allowed to** with the same meaning:

- You can park here. / You're allowed to park here.*
- I can't use my father's computer. / I'm not allowed to use my father's computer.*

### Grammar in action

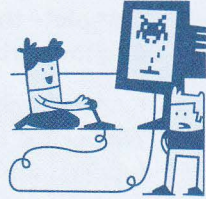
5 We use **Can I...?** (NOT *Could I...?* or *May I...?*) to offer to do something for someone:

- Can I give you a lift?*



6 We use **Can I/we?, Could I/we?** and **May I/?** to ask for something or for permission to do something.

- Can I have a go now?*



**Can I?** is not as polite as **Could I?** **May I?** is very polite and is used in formal situations. Here, someone is talking to an interviewer in a job interview:

- Could/May I ask a question?*

7 We use **Can you?, Could you?** and **Would you?** to ask someone to do something. **Can you?** is not as polite as **Could you?** and **Would you?** Here, someone is talking to a friend:

- Can you be quiet?*

Here, someone is talking to a person they don't know:

- Could/Would you be quiet, please?*

8 We use **can** and **can't** to give or refuse permission to someone:

- Yes, you can use my phone.*
- You can't sit there, it's my friend's seat.*

9 We use **can/can't** and **be allowed to** to talk about what is permitted or not permitted by rules and laws:

- You can go to this club if you're over 18. /*
- You're not allowed to go to this club if you're under 18.*

### E In a restaurant

Complete the questions asked in a restaurant, using the words in brackets. There is more than one way of completing each question.

- 0 WAITER *Can/Could/May I take* your coat, sir? (I/take)
- 0 CUSTOMER *Could/Can we sit* at a table by the window? (we/sit)
- 1 CUSTOMER ..... me the menu please? (you/show)
- 2 CUSTOMER ..... me what this dish is, please? (you/tell)
- 3 WAITER ..... the chef's special, madam? (I/recommend)
- 4 CUSTOMER ..... now, please? (I/order)
- 5 WAITER ..... your order now? (I/take)
- 6 CUSTOMER ..... to another table, please? (we/move)
- 7 CUSTOMER ..... my order please? (I/change)
- 8 CUSTOMER ..... me another knife, please? (you/bring)
- 9 CUSTOMER ..... some more bread, please? (we/have)
- 10 CUSTOMER ..... me the bill, please? (you/get)



## F Home rules

Complete this interview with a child in a children's magazine about what he is permitted to do at home. Change 'can/can't' to 'be allowed to' and 'be allowed to' to 'can/can't'.

(Can you eat) *Are you allowed to eat*<sup>0</sup> meals in front of the TV?

(We aren't allowed to do) *We can't do*<sup>1</sup> that usually but (we're allowed to do) .....<sup>1</sup> if there's a special programme on TV.

(Are you allowed to watch) .....<sup>2</sup> films on your own?

(I can't watch) .....<sup>3</sup> violent films. One of my friends, Ben, (is allowed to watch) .....<sup>4</sup> anything he wants, but

(I can't do) .....<sup>5</sup> that. (I can watch) .....<sup>6</sup> films for my age but (I'm not allowed to watch) .....<sup>7</sup> (films for teenagers or adults).

(Can you play) .....<sup>8</sup> computer games on school days?

(I'm allowed to play) .....<sup>9</sup> computer games when I get home but (I'm not allowed to play) .....<sup>10</sup> them for more than half an hour on school days.

## G Booking a hotel room

Complete this phone conversation using the phrases in the box. You need to form questions and positive and negative verbs.

could/wait may/have can/park could/tell could/give could/book  
can/go can/smoke would/spell can/leave can/use would/send  
can/help could/stay could/make

RECEPTIONIST ..... *Can I help*<sup>0</sup> you?  
MR LEACH Yes, .....<sup>1</sup> a room for next week?  
RECEPTIONIST Sure, .....<sup>2</sup> a moment, please? ... OK, .....<sup>3</sup>  
your surname?  
MR LEACH Yes, it's Leach.  
RECEPTIONIST .....<sup>4</sup> that for me?  
MR LEACH Yes it's L-E-A-C-H.  
RECEPTIONIST OK, Mr Leach, .....<sup>5</sup> me when you want to stay here?  
MR LEACH Yes, .....<sup>6</sup> a reservation for next weekend?  
RECEPTIONIST A single or a double room?  
MR LEACH .....<sup>7</sup> in a luxury single, please?  
RECEPTIONIST Sure. I must just tell you that .....<sup>8</sup> in the room.  
MR LEACH That's OK. Now, I have a question, .....<sup>9</sup> at the hotel?  
RECEPTIONIST Yes, .....<sup>10</sup> your car in the private car park for guests.  
MR LEACH And .....<sup>11</sup> the hotel gym?  
RECEPTIONIST Yes, .....<sup>12</sup> to the gym free of charge at any time.  
MR LEACH OK, I'll book the room.  
RECEPTIONIST Fine, .....<sup>13</sup> me your credit card details, please?  
MR LEACH Yes, and .....<sup>14</sup> me confirmation of the booking by email?  
RECEPTIONIST Yes, of course.

In exercises B, C and F, there are three phrasal verbs with *up*. Complete each phrasal verb. The meaning of each one is in brackets:

- A ..... up  
(talk louder)  
B ..... up  
(find information in a book, on a website, etc.)  
C ..... up  
(not go to bed until a later time)

WORD FOCUS

**OVER TO YOU** Now go to page 123.