

Can, could and (be) able to

A We use **can** to say that something is possible or allowed, or that somebody has the ability to do something. We use **can + infinitive (can do / can see etc.)**:

- ☐ We **can see** the lake from our hotel.
- ☐ 'I don't have a pen.' 'You **can use** mine.'
- ☐ **Can** you **speak** any foreign languages?
- ☐ I **can come** and see you tomorrow if you like.
- ☐ The word 'dream' **can be** a noun or a verb.

The negative is **can't (= cannot)**:

- ☐ I'm afraid I **can't come** to the party on Friday.

B You can say that somebody **is able to** do something, but **can** is more usual:

- ☐ We **are able to see** the lake from our hotel.

But **can** has only two forms: **can (present)** and **could (past)**. So sometimes it is necessary to use **(be) able to**. Compare:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can't sleep. | <input type="checkbox"/> I haven't been able to sleep recently. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tom can come tomorrow. | <input type="checkbox"/> Tom might be able to come tomorrow. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maria can speak French, Spanish and English. | <input type="checkbox"/> Applicants for the job must be able to speak two foreign languages. |

C Could

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with:

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

- ☐ We had a lovely room in the hotel. We **could see** the lake.
- ☐ As soon as I walked into the room, I **could smell** gas.
- ☐ I was sitting at the back of the theatre and **couldn't hear** very well.

We also use **could** to say that somebody had the general ability or permission to do something:

- ☐ My grandfather **could speak** five languages.
- ☐ We were totally free. We **could do** what we wanted. (= we were allowed to do)

D Could and was able to

We use **could** for *general* ability. But if you want to say that somebody did something in a specific situation, use **was/were able to** or **managed to (not could)**:

- ☐ The fire spread through the building very quickly, but fortunately everybody **was able to escape / managed to escape**. (*not could escape*)
- ☐ We didn't know where David was, but we **managed to find / were able to find** him in the end. (*not could find*)

Compare:

- ☐ Jack was an excellent tennis player when he was younger. He **could beat** anybody. (= he had the *general* ability to beat anybody)

but Jack and Andy played a match yesterday. Andy played well, but Jack **managed to beat** him. (= he managed to beat him this time)

The negative **couldn't (could not)** is possible in all situations:

- ☐ My grandfather **couldn't swim**.
- ☐ We looked for David everywhere, but we **couldn't find** him.
- ☐ Andy played well, but he **couldn't beat** Jack.

26.1 Complete the sentences using **can** or **(be) able to**. Use **can** if possible; otherwise use **(be) able to**.

- Gary has travelled a lot. He can speak five languages.
- I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.
- Nicole drive, but she doesn't have a car.
- I used to stand on my head, but I can't do it any more.
- I can't understand Mark. I've never understand him.
- I can't see you on Friday, but I meet you on Saturday morning.
- Ask Katherine about your problem. She might help you.

26.2 Write sentences about yourself using the ideas in brackets.

- (something you used to be able to do)
I used to be able to sing well.
- (something you used to be able to do)
I used
- (something you would like to be able to do)
I'd
- (something you have never been able to do)
I've

26.3 Complete the sentences with **can/can't/could/couldn't** + the following:

~~come~~ eat hear run sleep wait

- I'm afraid I can't come to your party next week.
- When Dan was 16, he 100 metres in 11 seconds.
- 'Are you in a hurry?' 'No, I've got plenty of time. I'
- I was feeling sick yesterday. I anything.
- Can you speak a little louder? I you very well.
- 'You look tired.' 'Yes, I last night.'

26.4 Complete the answers to the questions with **was/were able to** ...

- A: Did everybody escape from the fire?
B: Yes, although the fire spread quickly, everybody was able to escape.
- A: Did you finish your work this afternoon?
B: Yes, there was nobody to disturb me, so I
- A: Did you have problems finding our house?
B: Not really. Your directions were good and we
- A: Did the thief get away?
B: Yes. No-one realised what was happening and the thief

26.5 Complete the sentences using **could**, **couldn't** or **managed to**.

- My grandfather travelled a lot. He could speak five languages.
- I looked everywhere for the book, but I couldn't find it.
- They didn't want to come with us at first, but we managed to persuade them.
- Laura had hurt her leg and walk very well.
- I ran my first marathon recently. It was very hard, but I finish.
- I looked very carefully and I see somebody in the distance.
- I wanted to buy some tomatoes. The first shop I went to didn't have any, but I get some in the next shop.
- My grandmother loved music. She play the piano very well.
- A girl fell into the river, but fortunately we pull her out.
- I had forgotten to bring my camera, so I take any pictures.

May and might 1

A

Study this example situation:

You are looking for Ben. Nobody is sure where he is, but you get some suggestions.

Where's Ben?



He **may** be in his office.

(= perhaps he is in his office)

He **might** be having lunch.

(= perhaps he is having lunch)

Ask Ann. She **might** know.

(= perhaps she knows)

We use **may** or **might** to say that something is possible. Usually you can use **may** or **might**, so you can say:

- ☐ It **may** be true. or It **might** be true. (= perhaps it is true)
- ☐ She **might** know. or She **may** know.

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not** (or **mightn't**):

- ☐ It **may not** be true. (= perhaps it isn't true)
- ☐ She **might not** work here any more. (= perhaps she doesn't work here)

Study the structure:

I/you/he (etc.)	may might	(not)	be (true / in his office etc.) be (doing / working / having etc.) know / work / want etc.
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B

For the past we use **may have (done)** or **might have (done)**:

- ☐ A: I wonder why Kate didn't answer her phone.
B: She **may have been** asleep. (= perhaps she was asleep)
- ☐ A: I can't find my phone anywhere.
B: You **might have left** it at work. (= perhaps you left it at work)
- ☐ A: Why wasn't Amy at the meeting yesterday?
B: She **might not have known** about it. (= perhaps she didn't know)
- ☐ A: I wonder why David was in such a bad mood yesterday.
B: He **may not have been feeling** well. (= perhaps he wasn't feeling well)

Study the structure:

I/you/he (etc.)	may might	(not) have	been (asleep / at home etc.) been (doing / working / feeling etc.) known / had / wanted / left etc.
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C

Could is similar to **may** and **might**:

- ☐ It's a strange story, but it **could be** true. (= it is possible that it's true)
- ☐ You **could have left** your phone at work. (= it's possible that you left it there)

But **couldn't** (negative) is different from **may not** and **might not**. Compare:

- ☐ Sarah **couldn't have** got my message. Otherwise she would have replied.
(= it is not possible that she got my message)
- ☐ I wonder why Sarah hasn't replied to my message. I suppose she **might not have** got it.
(= it's possible that she didn't get it – so perhaps she did, perhaps she didn't)

29.1 Write these sentences in a different way using **might**.

- Perhaps Helen is in her office.
- Perhaps Helen is busy.
- Perhaps she is working.
- Perhaps she wants to be alone.
- Perhaps she was ill yesterday.
- Perhaps she went home early.
- Perhaps she had to go home early.
- Perhaps she was working yesterday.

She might be in her office.In sentences 9–11 use **might not**.

- Perhaps she doesn't want to see me.
- Perhaps she isn't working today.
- Perhaps she wasn't feeling well yesterday.

29.2 Complete each sentence with a verb in the correct form.

- 'Where's Ben?' 'I'm not sure. He might be having lunch.'
- 'Who is that man with Anna?' 'I'm not sure. It might her brother.'
- A: Who was the man we saw with Anna yesterday?
B: I'm not sure. It may her brother.
- A: What are those people doing by the side of the road?
B: I don't know. I suppose they might for a bus.
- 'Is Sarah here?' 'I can't see her. She may not yet.'

29.3 Read the situation and make sentences from the words in brackets. Use **might**.

- I can't find Jeff anywhere. I wonder where he is.
a (he / go / shopping) He might have gone shopping.
b (he / play / tennis) He might be playing tennis.
- I'm looking for Sophie. Do you know where she is?
a (she / watch / TV)
b (she / go / out)
- I can't find my umbrella. Have you seen it?
a (it / be / in the car)
b (you / leave / in the restaurant)
- Why didn't Dan answer the doorbell? I'm sure he was at home at the time.
a (he / go / to bed early)
b (he / not / hear / the doorbell)
c (he / be / in the shower)

29.4 Complete the sentences using **might not have ...** or **couldn't have ...**.

- A: Do you think Sarah got the message I sent her?
B: No, she would have replied. She couldn't have got it.
- A: I was surprised Amy wasn't at the meeting. Perhaps she didn't know about it.
B: That's possible. She might not have known about it.
- A: I wonder why they haven't replied to the email I sent. Do you think they received it?
B: Maybe not. They
- A: I wonder how the fire started. Was it an accident?
B: No, the police say it
- A: Mike says he needs to see you. He tried to find you yesterday.
B: Well, he very hard. I was in my office all day.
- A: The man you spoke to – are you sure he was American?
B: No, I'm not sure. He

Must mustn't needn't

A Must and mustn't

You **must** do something = it is necessary that you do it:

- ☐ Don't tell anybody what I said. You **must** keep it a secret.
- ☐ We haven't got much time. We **must** hurry.

You **mustn't** do something = it is necessary that you do *not* do it (so don't do it):

- ☐ You **must** keep it a secret. You **mustn't** tell anyone. (= don't tell anyone)
- ☐ We **must** be very quiet. We **mustn't** make any noise.

B Needn't and don't need to

You **needn't** do something = it's not necessary to do it (but you can if you like):

- ☐ We've got plenty of time. We **needn't** hurry. (= it is not necessary to hurry)
- ☐ Joe can stay here. He **needn't** come with us. (= it is not necessary for him to come)

You can also use **don't/doesn't need to**:

- ☐ We **don't need to** hurry.

Remember that we say **don't need to do / doesn't need to do**, but **needn't do** (without to).

C Needn't have (done)

Study this example situation:



Paul and Sue decided to go to a restaurant. They reserved a table.

later



But the restaurant was almost empty. So they **needn't have reserved** a table.

They **needn't have reserved** a table. = They reserved a table, but this was not necessary.

Compare **needn't** (do) and **needn't have** (done):

- ☐ Everything will be OK. You **needn't** worry. (it is not necessary)
- ☐ Everything was OK. You **needn't have** worried. (you worried, but it was not necessary)

D Needn't have (done) and didn't need to (do)

He **needn't have done** something = he did it, but now we know that it was not necessary:

- ☐ Why did he get up at 5 o'clock? He **needn't have got** up so early. He could have stayed in bed longer.

He **didn't need to** do something = it was not necessary to do it. It doesn't matter whether he did it or not:

- ☐ He **didn't need to** get up early, so he didn't.
- ☐ He **didn't need to** get up early, but it was a beautiful morning, so he did.

He **didn't have to** ... is also possible in these examples.

Exercises

32.1 Which is correct?

- 1 We haven't got much time. We must / mustn't hurry. (must is correct)
- 2 We've got plenty of time. We mustn't / don't need to hurry.
- 3 I have to talk to Gary. I must / mustn't remember to call him.
- 4 I have to talk to Gary. I mustn't / needn't forget to call him.
- 5 There's plenty of time for you to make up your mind. You mustn't / don't need to decide now.
- 6 We needn't / mustn't wash these tomatoes. They've already been washed.
- 7 This is a valuable book. You must / needn't take good care of it and you mustn't / don't need to lose it.
- 8 A: What sort of house do you want to buy? Something big?
B: Well, it mustn't / needn't be big – that's not so important. But it must / mustn't have a nice garden – that's essential.

32.2 Complete the sentences. Use **needn't** + one of these verbs:ask come explain ~~leave~~ walk

- 1 We've got plenty of time. We needn't leave yet.
- 2 I can manage the shopping alone. You with me.
- 3 We all the way home. We can get a taxi.
- 4 Just help yourself if you'd like more to eat. You first.
- 5 I understand the situation perfectly. You further.

32.3 Write two sentences for each situation. Use **needn't have** in the first sentence and **could have** in the second (as in the example). For **could have**, see Unit 27.

- 1 Why did you rush? Why didn't you take your time?
You needn't have rushed. You could have taken your time.
- 2 Why did you walk home? Why didn't you take a taxi?
.....
- 3 Why did you stay at a hotel? Why didn't you stay with us?
.....
- 4 Why did she phone me in the middle of the night? Why didn't she wait until the morning?
.....
- 5 Why did you shout at me? Why weren't you more patient?
.....
- 6 Why did you leave without saying anything? Why didn't you say goodbye to me?
.....

32.4 Correct the sentences where necessary.

- 1 We have plenty of time. We don't need hurry. We don't need to hurry.
- 2 You must keep it a secret. You mustn't tell anybody else. OK
- 3 I'll be all right. You needn't to worry about me.
- 4 You mustn't wait for me. You go on and I'll join you later.
- 5 You don't need to keep these emails. You can delete them.
- 6 I needn't have gone out, so I stayed at home.
- 7 I needn't have bought eggs. We had some already.