

# 45 Ability and possibility: *can, could, be able to*

- We use *can* to talk about ability and possibility in the present: *I **can** swim. He **can't** drive. **Can** we **buy** stamps here?*
- *Be able to* has a similar meaning to *can*, but it is not as common: *I'm sorry, I'm **not able to** take your call right now.*
- We use *could* or *was/were able to* to talk about general ability and possibility in the past: *She **could/was able to** read by the age of four.*
- For a single action that was completed successfully, we use *was/were able to*, not *could*: ***Were** you **able to** buy a ticket for the concert? (Not ~~*Could you buy a ticket for the concert?*~~)*
- We use *couldn't* and *wasn't/weren't able to* for both general situations and single actions: *We **couldn't/weren't able to** phone you yesterday.*

## PRACTICE

### 45a Re-write the sentences. Use *be able to*.

- |   |                                     |   |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| 0 | Tara can make paper birds.          | <i>Tara is able to make paper birds.</i><br>..... |
| 1 | Bob couldn't read until he was six. | .....   |
| 2 | We can see the sea from our window. | .....   |
| 3 | Not many people can drive a bus.    | .....   |
| 4 | We could speak to them in English.  | .....   |
| 5 | They couldn't dance or sing.        | .....   |
| 6 | I couldn't understand the film.     | .....   |

**45b** Cross out one of the answers if it is incorrect.

- 0 United ~~could~~ / *were able to* win the match in extra time. The score was 3–2.
- 1 The shop *could* / *was able to* repair my computer, but it was expensive.
- 2 After several years in Spain, Gary *could* / *was able to* speak Spanish fluently.
- 3 *Could you* / *Were you able to* create web pages after the computer course?
- 4 I failed my first driving test, but I *could* / *was able to* pass the second time.
- 5 Jessie *couldn't* / *wasn't able to* cook until she was an adult.
- 6 We *couldn't* / *weren't able to* ski yesterday because it was snowing heavily.

**45c** Re-write the sentences. Use the words in brackets.

- 0 I didn't know how to dance, so I decided to take lessons. (could)  
I decided to take lessons because I ..... **couldn't dance** .....
- 1 Luckily, I managed to find classes near my house. (able)  
Luckily, I ..... classes near my house.
- 2 At first, I was nervous and it was impossible for me to do what the teacher said. (could)  
At first, I was nervous, so I ..... what the teacher said.
- 3 Now, I'm still not a fantastic dancer, but I enjoy it. (can't)  
Now, I still ..... very well, but I enjoy it.
- 4 And I know how to dance lots of different styles. (able)  
And I ..... lots of different styles.

## 46 Permission: *can, could, be allowed to*

- We use *can* or *am/is/are allowed to* to talk about things we have permission to do: *All students **can/are allowed to** use the computers. **Can I smoke?** No, you **can't**. **Are candidates allowed to** use dictionaries? Yes, they are.*
- We use *could* or *was/were allowed to* to talk about permission in the past: *We **could/were allowed to** wear jeans at school. (We had permission.)*
- We use *Can I ... ?* or *Could I ... ?* to ask someone for their permission. *Could* is more formal or polite: ***Can I use your phone, Kate?** **Could I use the phone, please, Mrs Wilson?***
- To give permission, we can say: *Yes, all right/of course. Certainly.*
- To refuse permission, we can say: *No, sorry, you can't./I'm afraid not.*
- We often give a reason for refusing permission: *Can I borrow your car? No, you can't. It's at the garage.*



We cannot use *Am I allowed to ... ?* to ask someone for their permission: ***Can we borrow your ladder, please?** (Not ~~Are we allowed to borrow your ladder, please?~~)*

# PRACTICE

## 46a Complete the sentences. Use one or two words in each gap.

- 0 Jenny ..... *couldn't* ..... leave work early yesterday.
- 1 A: Are we ..... to borrow three DVDs from the library?  
B: No, you ..... , I'm afraid. The limit is two per person.
- 2 A: Excuse me, sir. .... we use your phone, please?  
B: I'm afraid ..... . It's out of order.
- 3 I wasn't allowed ..... go to the music festival last month.
- 4 Dave ..... borrow my bicycle if he likes, but he must return it soon.
- 5 ..... you allowed to wear make-up when you were a child?
- 6 A: ..... I open the window please? It's very hot in here.  
B: Yes, of ..... . You ..... also open the door if you like.
- 7 She ..... wear trousers to work at the bank, but she isn't allowed to wear jeans.
- 8 A: Excuse me, ..... we book a tennis court at two o'clock, please?  
B: Sorry, you can't . They're all booked today, but you ..... play tomorrow.

## 46b Re-write the sentences. Use the words in brackets.

- 0 In the past boys were allowed to do a lot more than girls. (could)  
In the past boys ..... *could do* ..... a lot more than girls.
- 1 Are we allowed to swim in this part of the river? (can)  
..... in this part of the river?
- 2 The children can stay up late on Saturdays. (are)  
The children ..... late on Saturdays.
- 3 When we were ten, we were allowed to go to the park on our own. (could)  
When we were ten, we ..... to the park on our own.
- 4 We could take our dog on the beach in France. (to)  
We ..... our dog on the beach in France.
- 5 Jamie is allowed to come on holiday with us this summer. (can)  
Jamie ..... on holiday with us this summer.
- 6 Could you take photos inside the museum? (allowed)  
Were ..... photos inside the museum?
- 7 Visitors were allowed to feed the animals at the safari park. (could)  
Visitors ..... the animals at the safari park.
- 8 You're allowed to play on the computer if no one else needs it. (can)  
You ..... on the computer if no one else needs it.