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1 : to be able to (do something) I don't need any help. I can do it myself. I can't decide what to do. All we can do [=the only thing we can do] now is wait. : to know how to (do something) : to have the power or skill to (do something) A weight lifter can lift a very heavy weight. Only Congress can do that. : to be designed to (do something) a car that can hold five people [=a car that has enough room for five people] How fast can [=does, will] the car go? — sometimes used without a following verb I visit her whenever I can. I don't know if I'll be able to fix the problem, but I'll do what I can. Please help us if you can. 2 — used to describe what someone sees, feels, thinks, etc. "Can you see him yet?" "Yes, I can see him clearly." Can [=do] you remember/understand how to do it? 3 a — used to say that something is or is not possible Do you think he can still be alive? [=do you think it is possible that he is still alive?] I don't think he can still be alive. [=I think he must be dead] These problems can be dealt with more easily at the local level. You can't always get what you want in life. At this time of year many birds can be found on the island. [=there are many birds on the island at this time of year] If you don't tell me what the problem is, I can't help you. You can't be very smart [=you aren't very smart] if you believe that! He was supposed to be here an hour ago. Where can he (possibly) be? [=where is he?] (+) more examples [-] hide examples (+) Example sentences [-] Hide examples — sometimes used in the emphatic phrase as...as can be! [=I want the biggest cake possible] They seemed as happy as can be [=they seemed extremely happy] when I last saw them. b — used in speech to express surprise or disbelief! You must be joking! You can't/cannot (possibly) be serious! He can't really have meant that. [=I don't believe that he meant that] You can't (possibly) believe that! The price is \$50? That can't be right. [=that must be wrong] 4 a : to have permission to (do something) You can do it tomorrow if you like. "Can I leave now?" "No, you can't." You can't leave until you finish washing the dishes. — compare may 4 5 a — used to say what should or should not be done You can't leave now! The party is just getting started! Why can't you be more polite? [=you should be more polite; why aren't you more polite?] b — used in angry speech to tell someone to do something If you don't like it here, you can just leave! 6 a — used to describe the way a person sometimes behaves She can be very rude at times. I [=she is sometimes very rude] b — used to describe something that sometimes or often happens In this part of the country the weather can change quickly. [=The weather often changes quickly] Usage Could is used as the past tense of can to describe an ability that someone had in the past or to say that something was possible in the past. I could run fast when I was young, but I can't run fast now. It used to be that you could drive for miles here without seeing another person, but now there are houses and people everywhere. To describe a specific occurrence in the past, use was/were able to instead of could. By working long hours, we were able to finish the project on time. In the future tense, will be able to is used. If you keep practicing, you'll be able to play the piano someday. She believes that someday people will be able to vote at home on their computers. Can can be used to suggest something that might happen in the future. If we save enough money, we can go to Hawaii for our vacation next year. no can do informal + humorous — used in speech to say you cannot do something that you have been asked or told to do "Can you give me a ride to work tomorrow?" "Sorry—no can do. My car is in the shop." to be able to; have the ability, power, or skill to.She can solve the problem easily. I'm sure to know how to.He can play chess, although he's not particularly good at it.to have the power or means to.A dictator can impose his will on the people.to have the right or qualifications to.He can change whatever he wishes in the script.may, have permission to.Can I speak to you for a moment?to have the possibility.A coin can land on either side. can , can , canst , can , can , could , could , couldst , could , could , can , can , cunning , a sealed container for food, beverages, etc., as of aluminum, sheet iron coated with tin, or other metal.a receptacle for garbage, ashes, etc..a bucket, pail, or other container for holding or carrying liquids.a drinking cup; tankard.a metal or plastic container for holding film on cores or reels.Slang. Usually Vulgar. toilet, bathroom.Slang. jail.He's been in the can for a week.Slang. Sometimes Vulgar. buttocks.Slang. cans, a set of headphones designed to cover the ears.Military Slang. a depth charge.a destroyer.to preserve by sealing in a can, jar, etc.Slang. to dismiss; fire.Slang. to throw (something) away.Slang. to put a stop to.to record, as on film or tape.a container, esp for liquids, usually of thin sheet metal.another name (esp US) for tinAlso called: canful. the contents of a can or the amount a can will holda slang word for toilet or buttocks See toiletmay a slang word for destroyerSlang may a depth chargea shallow cylindrical metal container of varying size used for storing and handling filminformal a complicated problemSee carry(of a film, piece of music, etc) having been recorded, processed, edited, etcinformal arranged or agreedthe contract is almost in the can"Collins English Dictionary — Complete & Unabridged" 2012 Digital Edition © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012to put (food, etc) into a can or cans; preserve in a canslang (tr) to dismiss from a jobinformal (tr) to stop (doing something annoying or making an annoying noise) (esp in the phrase can it! informal (tr) to reject or discard"Collins English Dictionary — Complete & Unabridged" 2012 Digital Edition © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012used as an auxiliary to indicate ability, skill, or fitness to perform a taskI can run a mile in under four minutesused as an auxiliary to indicate permission or the right to somethingused as an auxiliary to indicate knowledge of how to do somethinghe can speak three languages fluentlyused as an auxiliary to indicate the possibility, opportunity, or likelihoodmy trainer says I can win the race if I really work hard"Collins English Dictionary — Complete & Unabridged" 2012 Digital Edition © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012Can but and cannot but are formal and now somewhat old-fashioned expressions suggesting that there is no possible alternative to doing something. Can but is equivalent to can only. We can but do our best. Cannot but is the equivalent of cannot help but. We cannot but protest against these injustices. See also help.CanI and mayI are frequently but not always interchangeable in senses indicating possibility: A power failure can (or may) occur at any time. Despite the insistence by some, can can mean only "to be able" and may means "to be permitted," both are regularly used in seeking or granting permission: Can (or May) I borrow your glue gun? You can (or may) use it tomorrow. Sentences using can occur chiefly in spoken English. May in this sense occurs more frequently in formal contexts: May I address the court, Your Honor? In negative constructions, can't or cannot is more common than may not : You can't have it today. I need it myself. The contraction mayn't is rare.Origin of can1 First recorded before 900, Middle English, Old English, present indicative singular 1st, 3rd person of cunnan "to know, know how"; cognate with German, Old Norse, Gothic kann; ken, know 1Origin of can2First recorded before 1000; Middle English canne, can(e), Old English canne, cognate with German Kanne, Old Norse kanna, all perhaps from West Germanic; compare Late Latin canna "small vessel"Origin of can1Old English canne; related to Old Norse, Old High German kanna, Irish gann, Swedish kana sledOrigin of can2Old English cunnan; related to Old Norse kanna, Old High German kunnan, Latin cognoscere to know, Sanskrit jñānāti he knows; see ken , uncouthExamples have not been reviewed.With the World Cup also expanding next summer, national team players such as Thuram could play more than 70 games in 44 weeks and more than 120 games over two seasons.A prolonged absence for Plum could spell serious trouble for a team already reeling.While the capture of Mr Boelter gave some measure of relief here, discussions on the airwaves in Minnesota have turned towards what can be done to cut the political temperature and prevent future attacks.Still, Carney said on Tuesday this summit "can begin a new era of co-operation that promotes long-term resilience over short-term efficiency".But some, including a clam that is the world's longest living animal, could struggle to adapt.bottle bucket canister jar package Definitions and idiom definitions from Dictionary.com Unabridged, based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2023Idioms from The American Heritage® Idioms Dictionary copyright © 2002, 2001, 1995 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. #S1 W1 modal verb (negative short form can't) Company canwoodCanabrowse#abbccdddeeffghhijklmmnnoooppprrsstuuwwwxyzzzAboutContact usCookies, terms, & privacyHelpFollow usGet the Word of the Day every day! © 2025 Dictionary.com, LLC From Longman Dictionary of Contemporary Englishcancan1 /kæn, strong kæn/ ● ● ● S1 W1 modal verb (negative short form can't) 1 CANability to be able to do something or to know how to do something You can swim, can't you? Even a small personal computer can store vast amounts of information. Gabriella can speak French fluently. I'm afraid Mr Harding can't see you now - he's busy. The police are doing all they can to find her.2 requesting spokenASK FOR something/ASK somebody TO DO something used to ask someone to do something or give you something Can I have a drink, please? Can you help me lift this box? 3 LET/ALLOWallowed to be allowed to do something or to have the right or power to do something You can't park here - it's a no parking zone. 'Can we go home now?' 'No we can't.' A police officer can insist on seeing a driver's license.4 POSSIBLEpossibility used to say that something is possible I am confident a solution can be found. There can be no doubt that he is guilty. The boxes can be stored flat. Can he still be alive after all this time? 5 CANseeing/hearing etc used with the verbs 'see', 'hear', 'feel', 'taste', and 'smell', and with verbs connected with thinking, to mean that someone sees something, hears something etc Here they are - I can see their car. Can you smell something burning? I can't understand why you're so upset. He can't remember where he put the tickets. 6 not true (in negatives) used to say that you do not believe that something is true "This can't be the right road. It can't be easy caring for someone else's children. 7 should not [in questions and negatives] used to say that someone should not or must not do something You can't expect the world to change overnight. We can't go on like this. Jill's left her husband, but can you blame her after the way he treated her?8 SURPRISEdsurprise/anger [usually in questions and negatives] spoken used when you are surprised or angry 'You can't be serious!' 'They can't have arrived already, surely!' How can you be so stupid! 9 SOMETIMESsometimes used to say what sometimes happens or how someone sometimes behaves It can be quite cold here at night. Peter can be really annoying. 10 MUSTgiving orders spoken used to tell someone in an angry way to do something And you can stop that quarrelling, the pair of you. If you won't keep quiet, you can get out. 11 - no can doTHESAURSto be able to do somethingcan do something to have the ability, opportunity, time, or equipment that you need in order to do something. Could is used as the past form, and is also used to say what is or may be possible! don't think Mike can drive.' 'Yes, he can.'He can run faster than me.Can you see the TV, or should I move?This program can translate your e-mail into other languages.How many hamburgers do you think you can eat?Adrian could read when he was four.If we had a boat we could row across to the island.Why didn't they ask me? I could have done it for them for half the price.She could win.be able to do something used when talking about ability or success in the past or ability in the future, or when you need to use an infinitive. It is also used instead of can in more formal English was able to get a good job (=I got one).Will you be able to carry those bags on your own?If you want to join the expedition, you must be able to speak Spanish.The young birds are now able to fly.be capable of something to have the ability, energy, or qualities needed to do something, especially something very difficult or unusual - use this about people or machinesShe's perfectly capable (=completely capable) of dealing with the situation.The car is capable of a top speed of 200 mph.No one thought he was capable of murder.be able to do something to be able to do something, especially something that is unusual or that most people cannot doShe seemed to have the ability to make people do anything she wanted.I believe the team definitely has the ability to win the championship.be in a position to do something to be able to do something because you have enough knowledge, power, money, or equipment to do itWe will have to run more tests before we are in a position to say whether the document is authentic or not.They expect to be in a position to begin construction within two years.manage to do something to succeed in doing something difficult, especially after trying very hardHe finally managed to find an apartment near his office.At least three of the hostages managed to escape.to be unable to do somethingcan't/cannot do something to be unable to do something because you do not have the ability, opportunity, time, or equipment that you need. Couldn't/could not is used as the past form.Louise can't see anything without her glasses.He couldn't remember where he had left the car.'Will you help me move this?' 'I'm sorry, I can't - my back's still giving me trouble.'I couldn't have done it without your help.I could never have climbed that ridge - I'm too out of shape.Scientists still cannot explain exactly how the virus reproduces.Sarah could not understand why anyone would want to hurt her.not be able to do something used when talking about inability in the past or the future, when you need to use an infinitive, and in more formal EnglishUnfortunately, I wasn't able to help them. I don't think I'll be able to come to the meeting after all.The doctor told Tina she wouldn't be able to have children.I've looked all over the house but I haven't been able to find my keys anywhere.be unable to do something especially written to not be able to do something, especially something important that you want to do or need to doHe was unable to sleep and lay awake all night.Many passengers were unable to reach the lifeboats in time.not be in a position to do something (also be in no position to do something) formal to not be able to do something because you do not have enough knowledge, power, money, or equipment to do itI'm afraid I'm not in a position to answer your questions.Having committed military force there, America is in no position to repeat this strategy elsewhere.not be capable of something (also be incapable of something) to not have the physical strength or mental ability to do something - often used when criticizing someoneMy son seems to be incapable of keeping a job.She's not capable of looking after herself anymore.Her father was a man who was utterly incapable of pity or sympathy. GRAMMAR: Patterns with can • Like other modal verbs, you use can before the base form of the main verb (=the infinitive without 'to'): We can hear the birds singing. You can go home now.Sharks can be dangerous. ✗Don't say: We can to go home. | We can going home. • The past tense of can is could: We could hear the birds singing.The teacher said we could go home. • You also use was/were able to when talking about the ability to do something in the past, especially something that was difficult: He was able to walk a few steps. • In questions you say Can I/he/she etc. Can we go home? • In negatives you say can't (spoken) or cannot (written): I can't hear you! He cannot leave prison. • You also use is/are unable to when saying that someone does not have the ability to do something: He is unable to walk. Examples from the Corpuscan • The police still haven't found her but they're doing all they can. • That kind of plastic can be molded into any shape. • He can be such a jerk sometimes. • I'm sure we can finish in time. • The word "bill" can have several different meanings. • Can I have the check, please? • If you don't want to learn, you can leave right now. • There's hardly any traffic and you can really go fast. • Jean can speak French fluently. • That's really nice of you, but I really can't accept it. • That can't be right. • I can't swim. • In soccer, you can can't touch the ball with your hands. • If you have a complaint, you can talk to the manager. • Oh, I can taste the lemon grass! • I told her she can watch TV till bedtime. • Can we turn the air conditioner on? • Sure she's mad, can you blame her? • Can you hear all right in the back row? Daily life, Technologydoce 041 eacancan2 /kæn/ ● ● ● S2 noun [countable] 1 Da metal container in which food or drink is preserved without air • a can of deodorant • soft drink cans • She was carrying an armful of cat-food cans and smirking to herself. • You'll need three large cans of paint. • We are conserving our resources for we are down to our last few candles and have only one can of paraffin left. • I could scour the trash cans! • Four pilots, each holding an unopened can of beer, marched around the bunker. can of • a can of tuna fishFoodcancan3 verb (canned, canning) [transitive] American English 1 DFto preserve food by putting it into a metal container from which all the air is removed SYN tin British English2 LEAVE A JOB OR ORGANIZATION informal to dismiss someone from a job SYN sack3 - can it! - See Verb tableExamples from the Corpuscan • As long as you live in my house I can. • I kept saying, 'I think I can.' • It is in our vital interest to do it as properly and as thoroughly as we can. • Scripts in different windows, meanwhile, can access each others' variables and objects, and even call remote functions. • Thus many Great Groups are fueled by an invigorating, completely unrealistic view of what they can accomplish. • Did you hear that they canned Linda? • Only after long and painful work on oneself can that chief feature be at last revealed. • And cable operators are doing all they can to get the government to prevent phone companies from carrying video programming. • These parents want to do all they can to help, so they develop schemes to ensure that homework is completed.Origin can1 Old English cunnan can2 Old English canne modal verb Verb Formscannot can't past simple could notcouldn't Idioms jump to other results used to say that it is possible for somebody/something to do something, or for something to happen can run fast.Can you call back tomorrow?He couldn't answer the question.The stadium can be emptied in four minutes.I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can.Please let us know if you cannot attend the meeting, used to say that somebody knows how to do somethingShe can speak Spanish.Can you cook?I could drive a car before I left school. used with the verbs 'feel', 'hear', 'see', 'smell', 'taste'She could feel the warmth of the sun on her face.I can hear music.Grammar Point can / could / be able to / managecan / could / be able to / manageCan is used to say that somebody knows how to do something: It is also used with verbs of seeing, noticing, etc.I can hear someone calling. Can is also used with passive infinitives to talk about what it is possible to do:The podcast can be downloaded here.Can or be able to are used to say that something is possible or that somebody has the opportunity to do something:Can you/are you able to come on Saturday?You use be able to to form the future and perfect tenses and the infinitive.You'll be able to get a taxi outside the station.I have been able to get much work done today.She'd love to be able to play the piano.Could is used to talk about what someone was generally able to do in the past:Our daughter could walk when she was nine months old.You use was/were able to or manage (but not could) when you are saying that something was possible on a particular occasion in the past:I was able to/managed to find some useful books in the library.I could find some useful books in the library. In negative sentences, could not can also be used:We weren't able to/didn't manage to/couldn't get there in time. Could is also used with this meaning with verbs of seeing, noticing, understanding, etc.I could see there was something wrong.Could have is used when you are saying that it was possible for somebody to do something in the past but they did not try:We could have won the game but decided to let them win. used to show that somebody is allowed to do somethingYou can take the car, if you want.We can't wear jeans at work.Topics Permission and obligationa2 used to ask permission to do somethingCan I read your newspaper?Can I take you home?Which Word? can / maycan / mayCan and cannot (or can't) are the most common words used for asking for, giving or refusing permission:Can I borrow your bike?You can come with us if you want to.You can't park your car there.May (negative may not) is used as a polite and fairly formal way to ask for or give permission:May I borrow your pen?You may come if you wish. It is often used in official signs and rules:Visitors may use the swimming pool between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.Students may not use the college car park. The form mayn't is hardly ever used in modern English. used to ask somebody to help youCan you help me with this box?Can you feed the cat, please? used to make suggestionsWe can eat in a restaurant, if you like.I can take the car if necessary.Topics Suggestions and advicea2 used in the negative for saying that you are sure something is not trueThat can't be Mary—she's in New York.He can't have slept through all that noise.Topics Doubt, guessing and certaintyb1 used to express doubt or surpriseWhat can he be serious?Where can she have put it? used to say what somebody/something is often likeHe can be very tactless sometimes.It can be quite cold here in winter. (informal) used to say that somebody must do something, usually when you are angry?You can shut up or get out!Grammar Point modal verbsmodal verbsThe modal verbs are can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will and would. Dare, need, have to and used to also share some of the features of modal verbs.Modal verbs have only one form. They have no -ing or -ed forms and do not add -s to the 3rd person singular form:He can speak three languages.She will try and visit tomorrow.Modal verbs are followed by the infinitive of another verb without to. The exceptions are ought to, have to and used to:You must find a job.You ought to stop smoking.I used to smoke but I gave up two years ago.Questions are formed without do/does in the present, or did in the past:Can I invite Mary?Should I have invited Mary?Negative sentences are formed with not or the short form -n't and do not use do/does or did.You will find more help with how to use modal verbs at the dictionary entries for each verb. Word OriginOld English cunnan 'know' (in Middle English 'know how to'), related to Dutch kunnen and German können; from an Indo-European root shared by Latin gnoscere 'know' and Greek gignōskein 'know'. Idioms as happy, simple, sweet, etc. as can be as happy, etc. as possible can't be doing with somebody/something | can't be doing with somebody doing something (informal) used to say that you do not like something and are unwilling to accept it can't be doing with people who complain all the time. I can't be doing with you moaning all the time. (informal) used to say that you are not able or willing to do somethingSorry, no can do. I just don't have the time. See can in the Oxford Advanced American DictionarySee can in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English