

English grammar

Be able to

Grammar rules with examples

Be able to is used to express ability to do something. (*I was able to swim when I was five.*) It is sometimes possible to use the modal verb *can*, but only in the present tense (*I can speak English*), in the past tense (*I could swim when I was five*) and in the conditional tense (*I could try it if you helped me*).

Present tense: *I am able, you are able, he is able*

Past tense: *I was able, you were able, he was able*

Future tense: *I will be able*

Present perfect: *I have been able, he has been able*

Past perfect: *I had been able*

Future perfect: *I will have been able*

Questions and negative forms are made in the following way.

Questions: *Are you able? Were you able? Has she been able?*

Negative questions: *Are you not able? (Aren't you able?) Has she not been able? (Hasn't she been able?)*

Negative statements: *I am not able, You were not able, We have not been able*

Present ability

It is possible to use *be able to* if we talk about a general ability in the present, but *can* is more common.

Eve can sing very well.

Eve is able to sing very well.

Past ability

We can use *was/were able to* or *could* to talk about a general ability in the past.

Terry could speak German and French at primary school.

Terry was able to speak German and French at primary school.

But: *Could* is not used to talk about a specific event (one particular action). We must use *be able to*.

Terry was able to play football on Sunday because he wasn't injured.

This rule, however, does not apply to negatives and verbs of senses or thinking. In these cases both forms are possible.

We couldn't find your address.

We weren't able to find your address.

I could hear the noise.

I was able to hear the noise.

She could understand it.

She was able to understand it.

Future ability

We use *will be able to* to talk about a future ability. *Can* is not used for future actions.

She will be able to work next week.

Conditional ability

If we speculate about an ability in the present or future, we use *could* or *would be able to*.

I could live in London, I think.

I would be able to live in London, I think.

Could you come tomorrow?

Would you be able to come tomorrow?

If we speculate about an ability in the past, we usually use *could* + perfect infinitive (*could have gone*), even if *would have been able to* is also possible.

If Terry hadn't been injured, he could have played football.

If Terry hadn't been injured, he would have been able to play football.

Other cases

In all other cases we must use *be able to*.

I have never been able to type.

I like being able to drive.

I'd love to be able to communicate in English.

Be able to for possibility

Can is used in the present or future to express possibility.

The shop is closed. We can't go there.

The shop will be closed. We can't go there.

Could is used in the past.

You could meet her yesterday.

Be able to is used with all other tenses.

We haven't been able to go to the shop since it was closed.

We had been able to meet her before she fell ill.

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