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.*

**Be able to exercises:**

[www.e-grammar.org/be-able-to/](http://www.e-grammar.org/be-able-to/)