

can

[modal verb] to be able to, or free to, do something:
Most birds can fly, but some can't. • *You can stay the night, if you like* • *Chocolate can be addictive.*

NOTE: The negative form *cannot* is always spelt as one word. Its contraction is *can't*.

Grammar patterns

1 can/can't | + bare infinitive

Eric can speak five languages.

Can you ski? ~ No, I can't.

- ▲ to talk about your ability to do something

Doing grammar exercises can be boring.

Madrid can be very cold in winter.

- ▲ to talk about what sometimes happens, i.e. possibility

It can't be five o'clock already, surely?

He can't be French: he hasn't got a French accent.

- ▲ to say that you think something is unlikely or impossible

Can I use your hairdryer?

You can go into the mosque but you can't take photos.

- ▲ to request, give, or refuse permission

Can I help you with that?

I can do the shopping, if you like.

- ▲ to make offers

2 can't | + have | + past participle

Andrew can't have left: his coat's still here.

Judging by her Italian, she can't have lived in Italy very long.

- ▲ to say that it is not possible that something happened

Collocations

Can/can't are frequently combined with verbs of perception, like *see, hear, smell, feel*, etc., to say that you are aware of something happening now, through your senses:

I can hear someone playing music in the next apartment.

Can you see that bird? It looks like a finch.

Does that hurt? ~ No, I can't feel a thing.

Can/can't are also combined with verbs of cognition, like *imagine, believe, understand*:

I can't imagine what's happened to Ted.

Can you believe it? Mary wants to go back to New Zealand.

Set phrases

• 'I can't tell you how ...'

I can't tell you how relieved I was when they all left.

- ▲ to express strong feelings

• 'I can't believe (it)!'

Cathy! I can't believe it. What are you doing here?

I can't believe how much the boys have grown.

- ▲ to express surprise

• 'Who can that be?'

There's the phone. ~ Who can that be, at this time of night?

- ▲ to ask about an unexpected guest, phone call, etc.

Exercises

1 Study these concordance lines with *can* and classify them according to whether they relate to:

- 1 ability
- 2 possibility
- 3 permission

(There are three of each.)

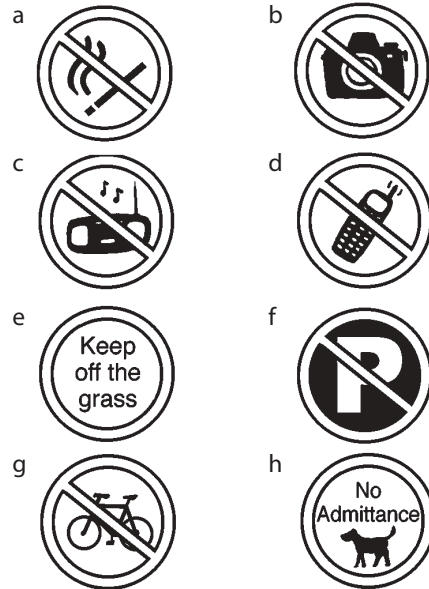
- a I **can** cook anything because I'm a Cordon Bleu chef.
- b You **can** also reach the museum by train from any station on the suburban line.
- c Now follow me, Piper, and you **can** join me in a bit of supper.
- d Chimps **can** create artworks, use tools in a quite sophisticated fashion, and understand the concept of language.
- e Anyone who turns up on the day **can** join in the fun.
- f Many paddling pools **can** also be used as sandpits.
- g Tropical fish **can** live without food for six weeks.
- h Many credit cards **can** now be used to draw cash from ATMs around the world.
- i You **can** keep it. I've got others.

2 Which of these sentences are true and which are false? Can you correct the false sentences?

- a Cats can't see in the dark.
- b Some tortoises can live up to 150 years.
- c Most bats can't fly.
- d Some fish can fly short distances.
- e Chameleons can change colour.
- f Kangaroos can't jump long distances.
- g Penguins can fly.
- h Some snakes can swim.
- i Horses can sleep on their feet.
- j Elephants can lift heavy weights.

3 Say what these signs mean, using *can't*:

You can't smoke here.



4 Other ways of expressing ability.

Look at these sentences that express ability:

Francesca *knows how to* design web pages.
 Kangaroos *are capable of* jumping 12 metres.
 I regret not *being able to* play a musical instrument.
 James *has the ability to* pick up languages quickly.
 Our technical support team *is equipped to* provide fast, speedy service.

Rewrite these sentences, using the word in brackets, so that the meaning is the same or similar:

- a Camels can travel long distances without water. (equipped)
- b Can Matthew talk yet? (able)
- c I think Robin can do much better at school. (capable)
- d Can you write in Arabic script? (know how)
- e We are looking for someone who can inspire confidence. (ability)
- f Some people can't teach. (incapable)
- g We regret that we cannot accept your offer. (unable)
- h Can anyone here change a tyre? (know how)