

Can and can't sentences in English

Can in English

Can expresses a possibility, a capacity, or the ability of the subject, or a permission.

Can't (or *cannot*, in a single word) is its negative form and expresses a disability. In the interrogative form, *Can...* must be placed at the beginning of the sentence.

1. Express an ability or inability

Can and *can't* are used to say that something or someone may or may not be able to do something:

- He can sing.
- She can speak Japanese fluently.
- I can't swim.
- Can you play the guitar?
- I'm afraid I can't come to work on Wednesday.

2. Express an opportunity or occasional characteristics

In this case, it is used in the affirmative form:

- The river can be dangerous at times.
- It can get hot there during the day.
- I know she can win the competition.
- I think your drone can be repaired.

3. To give or request permission or service

Can't can also be used to deny permission:

- You can use my car if you want.
- Mum, can I go out now?
- Can I ask you a question?
- Can I carry your luggage for you?
- You can go to the swimming pool if you like.

4. Indicate a prohibition with can't

- You can't smoke in the restaurant.
- We cannot park the car next to this fire hydrant.
- You cannot drive a car without a license.

5. Express a strong certainty with can't

In this case, *can't* is used to show that you are surprised, or that you are sure that something is wrong in the present or in a past situation, whether it is a past fact or an activity (the construction is different in both cases):

- It can't be possible!
- He can't have been to Japan. (construction: can't + have + verbe au part. passé)
- He can't have been drinking, he looked sober. (construction: can't + have been + ing)

6. Can and perception verbs

We often use *can* in front of perception verbs: hear, see, smell, touch...

- I can hear you but I can't see you!
- We can see the beach from our hotel.
- I can smell something burning.

7. Could

Could is the preterite of *can*. It is considered more polite or formal in a request:

- Could I have more tea, please?

8. Can or be able ?

We use *be able to* when *can* is impossible to use:

- I've never been able to sing.
- I'd like to be able to forgive you.
- Sorry for not being able to help you.