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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute Grammar

### Can, could, be able to, manage to



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*This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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#### **Catherine**

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me Catherine...

#### **Neil**

And me, Neil. Hello.

#### **Catherine**

In this programme we're talking about modal verbs of ability.

#### **Neil**

Yes, we are. We'll explain what they are...

#### **Catherine**

We'll give you some useful tips on using them...

#### **Neil**

There'll be lots examples...

#### **Catherine**

And of course we'll finish with a quiz.

#### **Neil**

So here we go. First of all, what are modals of ability?

#### **Catherine**

Well, there are lots of different modal verbs like **must**, **might** and **have to**. We use them together with main verbs, to add meaning to what we say.

#### **Neil**

So in this programme we're talking about the modal verbs **can** and **could**. We're looking at how we can use these modals with main verbs to add meaning related to ability. Here's Mike with an example.

#### **Mike**

Humans **can** only **live** without water for three to five days.

### Catherine

So that's **can** with the verb live to express ability: in this example, the ability to live without water. And in this programme we're also going to talk about ability with the phrase **be able to** plus a verb. It's similar to **can**, but it's particularly useful when we're suggesting that something is a bit surprising like this from Mike.

### Mike

Humans **can** only **live** without water for three to five days.  
However, they **are able to live** without food for up to three weeks.

### Neil

Okay. In those examples we're talking about ability in the present. Now for the past.

### Catherine

Yeah, the past. And the past of **can** is **could**. We also use **be able to** in the past but of course it becomes **was able to** or **were able to**. Listen.

### Mike

People in Asia **could write** before people in Europe.

### Catherine

Or...

### Mike

People in Asia **were able to write** before people in Europe.

### Neil

But sometimes you have to use **be able to** and not **could**.

### Catherine

And that happens when we're talking about a single event in the past, not general ability.

### Neil

Exactly. Another example please, Mike.

### Mike

After climbing for six hours, they **were able to reach** the top of the mountain.

### Catherine

You can't use **could** in that example because **could** is for general ability, not a single occasion like climbing one mountain.

### Neil

But there is another verb that you can use in that last sentence. Have a listen.

**Mike**

After climbing for six hours, they **managed to reach** the top of the mountain.

**Neil**

Thank you Mike. We often use **manage to** with a verb for ability if something is very difficult to do or if something is very successful.

**Catherine**

Exactly. Remember that **can** and **could** are always followed by the infinitive without **to**. And they are the same for all subject pronouns.

**Neil**

Right. But **be able to** changes for different persons. It's **am/is/are able to** for the present and **was/were able to** for the past.

**IDENT**

6 Minute Grammar, from [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com).

**Catherine**

And we're looking at modal verbs of ability.

**Neil**

Yes, we are. And we've got a few extra tips for you today.

**Catherine**

We have. And the first tip is, you know, sense verbs like **see**, **hear** and **smell**? And verbs of thinking like **believe**, **understand** and **remember**? Well, we usually use **can** and not **be able to** with those. Examples please, Mike.

**Mike**

I **can't understand** this question.

**Catherine**

Good. Second tip. When we have two main verbs together, we can't put **can** or **could** between them. For example, with the sentence I'd like to swim. It's okay to say...

**Mike**

I'd like to **be able to swim**.

**Catherine**

But it's not okay to say...

**Mike**

I'd like to **can** swim.

**Neil**

Oh no, you can't say that! It sounds a bit strange.

**Catherine**

Yes, horrible.

**Neil**

Next tip: There is also no present perfect form of **can**. If we need the present perfect for ability, we use **be able to**. An example, please?

**Mike**

He **hasn't been able to walk** since the accident.

**Catherine**

Thank you, Mike. And now a tip about **manage to** in the negative form. We say **can't manage to** in the present, but it's **couldn't manage to** or **didn't manage to** in the past.

**Mike**

I **can't manage to swim** that far!

Fifty five pies?! I **can't manage to eat** all those.

The men **couldn't manage to lift** the piano.

He **didn't manage to get** the grades he needed for university.

**Catherine**

Okay, thank you, Mike. And now - it's quiz time. Will you manage to get three correct answers?

**Neil**

Let's see. Are these sentences correct or incorrect? Number one: The villagers were good hunters, but they **couldn't grow** crops.

**Catherine**

That's correct.

**Neil**

Well done! Number two: My phone wasn't working but the receptionist **could phone** for a taxi.

**Catherine**

That's not correct. The correct sentence is **the receptionist was able to phone for a taxi.**

**Neil**

And number three: **I want to can do this.**

**Catherine**

And that's not correct. Between two main verbs, we have to use **be able to**. So the correct sentence is **I want to be able to do this.**

**Neil**

And that is the end of the quiz. Congratulations if you **managed to get** them all right!

**Catherine**

Yes. Well done! There's more about this on our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

**Both**

Bye.