can¹ (can)
Top 1000 frequently used words

Pronunciation: /kan/ /koʊd/ modal verb (3rd singular present can; past could)

1 be able to:
   - they can run fast
   - I could hear footsteps
   - he can’t afford it
   - be able to through acquired knowledge or skill:
     - I can speak Italian
   - have the opportunity or possibility to:
     - there are many ways vacationers can take money abroad
   - [with negative or in questions] used to express doubt or surprise about the possibility of something’s being the case:
     - he can’t have finished
     - where can she have gone?

2 be permitted to:
   - you can use the phone if you want to
   - nobody could legally drink on the premises
   - used to ask someone to do something:
     - can you open the window?
     - can’t you leave me alone?
   - used to make a suggestion or offer:
     - we can have another drink if you like

3 used to indicate that something is typically the case:
   - antique clocks can seem out of place in modern homes
   - he could be very moody

Origin:
Old English cunnan 'know' (in Middle English 'know how to'), related to Dutch kunnen and German können; from an Indo-European root shared by Latin gnoscere 'know' and Greek gignōskein 'know'

Usage
Is there any difference between can and may when used to request or express permission, as in may I ask you a few questions?; or can I ask you a few questions?; Many people feel that can should be reserved for expressions denoting capability, as in can you swim?, rather than for those relating to permission. May is, generally speaking, a politer and more formal way of asking for something, and is the better choice in more formal contexts. See also MAY (USAGE).