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can¹(can)

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Pronunciation: /kan /

modal verb (3rd singular present **can**; past **could** /kooḏ/)

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).

Oxford University Press
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