Basic Grammar: *Can, could, be able to*

**CAN vs. COULD: ability**

- **can/** can't (cannot) - present ability
- **could/** couldn't (could not) - past ability

**Exercise A.** Choose the verbs that best complete the sentences.

1. [Can/Could] you sing?  
   - I like to sing, but I don’t have a good voice.
2. [Can/could] I dance pretty well as a kid. I don’t dance much now.
3. [Can’t/couldn’t] I lift this box by myself. I need some help. Are you free?
4. Is your microphone turned on? I [can/could] see you, but I [can’t/couldn’t] hear you.
5. I miss my grandmother’s cooking. She [can/could] make the best soup!

**BE ABLE TO: ability**

- **was/were** be able to - past
- **am/is/are** able to - present
- **will be able to/be going to be able to** - future

**Exercise B.** Use the correct form of “be able to.” More than one form may be possible.

1. I’m sorry, but I _____________ meet you tomorrow morning. Can we meet in the afternoon?
2. I looked for my parents in the audience, but I _____________ find them. There were too many people.
3. _______________ help you today, but I can help tomorrow. Okay?
4. I was a little sad. My grandparents _______________ attend my high school graduation, but they called me and sent a nice card.
5. I’m worried that we _______________ finish all this work by Friday.

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**Basic Grammar: Can, could, be able to**

**CAN, COULD and BE ABLE TO: all uses**

| **ability** | can (present)  
could (past)  
be able to (past, present, future) |
| **possibility** | can  
could (less certain) |
| **permission** | can  
could (more polite) |

**Exercise C. Choose the verbs that best complete the sentences.**

1. Is it okay to give my homework to the teacher on Tuesday, not Monday?
   - Yeah, I think you [can/re able to] do that. She said anytime next week.
2. Hey, Max. [Can/Am I able to] ask you a question?
3. I’m sure I [can/could] finish the job by tomorrow. I did a lot already.
4. It wasn’t easy, but I [could/was able to] read the whole book last weekend.
5. Professor Morrison, [will I be able to/could I] speak to you after class, please?
6. They [weren’t able to/can’t] find enough students for the trip to Spain. The needed twenty, but they only had twelve.

**CAN, COULD and BE ABLE TO: all uses**

**Exercise D. Answer the questions.**

1. Name something you had the ability to do as a child, but you’re not able to do now.

2. You want to borrow your friend’s notes from class. What do you ask?

3. You need to tell your friends that it’s impossible to meet this weekend because you’re visiting relatives. What do you say?
Basic Grammar: Can, could, be able to

ANSWERS:
Exercise A. Choose the verbs that best complete the sentences.

1. [Can] you sing?
   - I like to sing, but I don’t have a good voice.
2. I [could] dance pretty well as a kid. I don’t dance much now.
3. I [can’t] lift this box by myself. I need some help. Are you free?
   (“Couldn’t” might work if you tried earlier, but “this box” suggests you’re trying right now.)
4. Is your microphone turned on? I [can] see you, but I [can’t] hear you.
5. I miss my grandmother’s cooking. She [could] make the best soup!

Exercise B. Use the correct form of “be able to.” More than one form may be possible.

1. I’m sorry, but I [won’t be able to]/[I’m not going to be able to] meet you tomorrow morning. Can we meet in the afternoon?
2. I looked for my parents in the audience, but I [wasn’t able to] find them. There were too many people.
3. Sorry. I [am not able to] help you today, but I can help tomorrow. Okay?
4. I was a little sad. My grandparents [weren’t able to] attend my high school graduation, but they called me and sent a nice card.
5. I’m worried that we [won’t be able to]/[we’re not going to be able to] finish all this work by Friday.

Exercise C. Choose the verbs that best complete the sentences.

1. Is it okay to give my homework to the teacher on Tuesday, not Monday?
   - Yeah, I think you [can] do that. She said anytime next week. permission
2. Hey, Max. [Can] ask you a question? permission
3. I’m sure I [can] finish the job by tomorrow. I did a lot already. possibility
   (“Can” sounds more certain. “Could” is less certain.)
4. It wasn’t easy, but I [was able to] read the whole book last weekend. ability
   (“Be able to” is more common when the action is difficult to do.)
5. Professor Morrison, [could I] speak to you after class, please? permission
6. They [weren’t able to] find enough students for the trip to Spain. The needed twenty, but they only had twelve. ability