

Modal Verbs: Be able to

Grammar Lesson, Examples & 30 Practice Questions

Modal Verbs: Be Able To

In English, we use **be able to** to talk about ability — what someone *can* or *cannot* do. It works in a similar way to the modal verb **can**, but **be able to** is more flexible. We can use it in tenses and situations where **can** does not work.

Look at these simple examples:

- She **is able to** speak three languages.
- I **was able to** finish the exam on time.
- They **will be able to** travel next summer.

In this lesson, you will learn how to form **be able to** correctly, when to use it instead of **can**, and how to avoid common mistakes.

What Does "Be Able To" Mean?

Let's start with a small story.

Marco is learning to drive. Right now, he cannot drive alone. But after his lessons, he will be able to drive. Last year, he was able to ride a motorbike, so he already understands the road rules.

In this story:

- **will be able to drive** = future ability (something he can do in the future)
- **was able to ride** = past ability (something he could do in the past)

Be able to expresses **ability** — the capacity or skill to do something. The verb **be** changes depending on the tense and the subject (the person or thing doing the action).

How to Form "Be Able To"

The structure is simple:

Subject + correct form of "be" + able to + base verb

The **base verb** is the verb in its simplest form, with no endings added. For example: *speak, run, drive, finish, help.*

The verb **be** changes to match the subject and the tense. Here is how it works across the most important tenses:

Present Simple: Am / Is / Are Able To

Use **am / is / are able to** to talk about ability in the present — what someone can do now or generally.

Subject	Form of "Be"	Example Sentence
I	am able to	I am able to cook Italian food.
You	are able to	You are able to understand this lesson.
He / She / It	is able to	She is able to play the piano.
We	are able to	We are able to work as a team.
They	are able to	They are able to speak English well.

Past Simple: Was / Were Able To

Use **was / were able to** to talk about ability in the past — what someone could do at a specific time or in general in the past.

Subject	Form of "Be"	Example Sentence
I	was able to	I was able to finish the report early.
You	were able to	You were able to pass the test.
He / She / It	was able to	He was able to find the office easily.
We	were able to	We were able to book a hotel room.
They	were able to	They were able to escape the fire.

Future Simple: Will Be Able To

Use **will be able to** to talk about ability in the future — what someone will be capable of doing later.

Subject	Form	Example Sentence
I	will be able to	I will be able to help you tomorrow.
You	will be able to	You will be able to drive after your lessons.
He / She / It	will be able to	She will be able to join us next week.
We	will be able to	We will be able to travel again soon.
They	will be able to	They will be able to move into their new flat.

Other Useful Tenses with "Be Able To"

Because **be able to** uses the verb **be**, we can combine it with many different tenses and structures. Here are some useful examples at B1 level:

Tense / Structure	Form	Example Sentence
Present Perfect	has / have been able to	She has been able to walk again since the operation.
After modal verbs (e.g. might, should)	might / should be able to	You might be able to get a refund.
After "would"	would be able to	I would be able to help if I had more time.

Negative Forms of "Be Able To"

To make a **negative** sentence with **be able to**, add **not** after the verb **be**.

Subject + be + not + able to + base verb

- *I **am not able to** attend the meeting.*
- *He **was not able to** find a parking space.*
- *They **will not be able to** come to the party.*

We often use contractions (short forms) in spoken English and informal writing:

Full Form	Contraction	Example
I am not able to	I'm not able to	I'm not able to come tonight.
He is not able to	He isn't able to	He isn't able to swim.
They were not able to	They weren't able to	They weren't able to finish in time.
We will not be able to	We won't be able to	We won't be able to meet this week.

Question Forms of "Be Able To"

To make a **question**, move the verb **be** to the beginning of the sentence, before the subject.

Be + subject + able to + base verb?

- ***Are** you **able to** come on Friday?*
- ***Was** she **able to** speak to the manager?*
- ***Will** they **be able to** deliver it by Monday?*
- ***Is** he **able to** use a computer?*

"Be Able To" vs "Can": Important Differences

Both **can** and **be able to** express ability, but they are not always interchangeable. Here is when to use each one:

When "Can" and "Be Able To" Mean the Same Thing

In the **present simple**, you can often use either form with the same meaning:

- *I **can** swim. = I **am able to** swim.*
- *She **can** speak French. = She **is able to** speak French.*

However, **be able to** often sounds more formal than **can**.

When You Must Use "Be Able To" (Not "Can")

Can only works in the present and, as **could**, in the past. It does not have a future form or a perfect form. This is why we need **be able to** in many situations.

Situation	Correct Form	Why?
Future ability	I will be able to drive soon.	"Can" has no future form. ❌ I will can drive.
After another modal verb	You might be able to get a discount.	Two modal verbs cannot go together. ❌ You might can get a discount.
Present perfect	She has been able to walk since June.	❌ She has canned walk since June.
After "would"	I would be able to help more if I had time.	❌ I would can help more.

Past Ability: "Could" vs "Was / Were Able To"

This is an important difference at B1 level. Both **could** and **was / were able to** talk about past ability, but they are used differently.

Use **could** for **general past ability** — a skill or ability someone had over a long period of time:

- *When I was young, I **could** run very fast. (general ability — I had this skill for years)*
- *She **could** speak Spanish when she was a child.*

Use **was / were able to** for **a specific successful action in the past** — something someone managed to do on one particular occasion:

- *The firefighters **were able to** rescue all the people. (they succeeded on this specific occasion)*
- *Despite the traffic, I **was able to** arrive on time.*

Important note: In negative sentences, you can usually use either **couldn't** or **wasn't / weren't able to** for both general and specific situations:

- *I **couldn't** find my keys. ✅*
- *I **wasn't able to** find my keys. ✅*

Common Mistakes

Here are the most common errors learners make with **be able to**. Study these carefully!

- ✗ She is able to speaks three languages.
- ✓ **Always use the base verb (no endings) after "able to".** She is able to **speak** three languages.
- ✗ I will can help you tomorrow.
- ✓ **Never put two modal verbs together.** I **will be able to** help you tomorrow.
- ✗ They might can get a refund.
- ✓ **Use "be able to" after another modal verb.** They might **be able to** get a refund.
- ✗ He was able to swim when he was young. (for a long-term general skill)
- ✓ **Use "could" for general past ability.** He **could** swim when he was young.
- ✗ The doctors could save the patient. (for one specific successful event)
- ✓ **Use "was / were able to" for a specific past success.** The doctors **were able to** save the patient.
- ✗ Are you able to speaks English?
- ✓ **Use the base verb after "able to".** Are you able to **speak** English?
- ✗ She have been able to work since Monday.
- ✓ **Use the correct form of "have" with the subject.** She **has** been able to work since Monday.

Be Able To: Quick Summary

Be able to expresses ability — what someone can or cannot do. Here are the key points to remember:

- The structure is: **subject + be + able to + base verb**.
- The verb **be** changes with the subject and tense: *am, is, are, was, were, will be, has/have been*.
- Use **not** after **be** to make negative sentences: *is not able to, wasn't able to, won't be able to*.
- Move **be** to the front of the sentence to make questions: *Are you able to...? Was he able to...?*
- Use **be able to** (not **can**) after other modal verbs, in the future, in the present perfect, and with **would**.
- In the past, use **could** for general ability and **was / were able to** for one specific successful action.
- Always use the **base verb** (no *-s*, *-ed*, or *-ing* endings) after **able to**.

Now practise **modal verbs: be able to** in the exercises below.

Modal Verbs: Be able to – Practice Test

B1 | 30 Questions: Multiple Choice, Fill-in-the-Gap & Fill-in-the-Blank

Part 1: Multiple Choice (Questions 1–10)

1 When I was younger, I ____ run very fast, but now I can't.

- A** can
- B** could
- C** am able to
- D** will be able to

2 After months of practice, she ____ speak French quite well now.

- A** could
- B** was able to
- C** is able to
- D** will be able to

3 By next year, he ____ finish his degree and get a job.

- A** can
- B** could
- C** is able to
- D** will be able to

4 The firefighters ____ rescue all the people from the burning building yesterday.

- A** could
- B** were able to
- C** are able to
- D** can

5 I ____ swim when I was five years old.

- A** am able to
- B** will be able to
- C** could
- D** be able to

6 She has studied hard, so she ____ pass the exam tomorrow.

- A** could
- B** was able to
- C** will be able to
- D** is able to

7 They ____ not understand the instructions because they were too complicated.

- A** will be able to
- B** were able to
- C** are able to
- D** could

8 Which sentence is grammatically correct?

- A** She will can drive after her lessons.
- B** She will be able to drive after her lessons.
- C** She can will drive after her lessons.
- D** She be able to drive after her lessons.

9 I ____ lift that heavy box on my own — it's too heavy for me.

- A** am not able to
- B** could
- C** was able to
- D** will be able to

10 After taking the course, he ____ use the software without any help.

- A** could
- B** was able to
- C** will able to
- D** is able to

Part 2: Fill in the Gap (Questions 11–20)

11 After months of practice, she ____ speak Spanish fluently.

- A** was able to
- B** could to
- C** be able to

12 I hope I ____ finish the project by Friday.

- A** will be able to
- B** will can
- C** would able to

13 He ____ lift the heavy box after he hurt his back.

- A** wasn't able to
- B** couldn't to
- C** didn't able to

14 By next year, the students ____ write complex essays in English.

- A** will be able to
- B** will be able
- C** would be able

15 She has studied hard, so now she ____ solve difficult math problems.

- A** is able to
- B** was able to
- C** will able to

16 They ____ book the tickets online yet because the website is down.

- A** haven't been able to
- B** weren't able to
- C** aren't able

17 If you study every day, you ____ pass the exam easily.

- A** will be able to
- B** can to
- C** would able to

18 I ____ swim when I was five years old.

- A** could
- B** was able to
- C** am able to

19 After the operation, he ____ walk without any help.

- A** was able to
- B** could
- C** can

20 She would like ____ travel abroad more often.

- A** to be able to
- B** be able to
- C** being able

Part 3: Fill in the Blank (Questions 21–30)

21 She _____ speak three languages when she was a child.

22 After months of practice, he _____ run a full marathon.

23 Will you _____ attend the meeting tomorrow?

24 I haven't _____ sleep well this week because of the noise.

25 They _____ work from home on Fridays.

26 By next year, I hope to _____ speak Spanish fluently.

27 He _____ finish the exam in time because he felt ill.

28 I _____ understand most of the news in English now.

29 She has _____ save more money since she changed her job.

30 We _____ get tickets for the concert even though it was nearly sold out.

Answer Key & Explanations

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Part 1: Multiple Choice

1. **B** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: We use could (the past form of can) to talk about a general ability in the past. I could run fast when I was a child.
2. **C** Correct Answer: is able to ✓ Explanation: Is able to describes a present ability. It is similar in meaning to can. She is able to speak French quite well now.
3. **D** Correct Answer: will be able to ✓ Explanation: We use will be able to to talk about a future ability. Can is not normally used with will. He will be able to get a job next year.
4. **B** Correct Answer: were able to ✓ Explanation: We use were able to (not could) when we talk about a specific successful action in the past. They were able to rescue everyone.
5. **C** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: Could is used to describe a general ability that existed in the past. I could swim at the age of five.
6. **C** Correct Answer: will be able to ✓ Explanation: Will be able to expresses a future ability or possibility. She will be able to pass the exam after studying so hard.
7. **D** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: Could not is used for a general inability in the past. They could not understand the instructions. Note: couldn't is the contracted form.
8. **B** Correct Answer: She will be able to drive after her lessons. ✓ Explanation: We cannot use two modal verbs together, so will can is incorrect. Instead, we use will be able to to express future ability. She will be able to drive soon.
9. **A** Correct Answer: am not able to ✓ Explanation: Am not able to expresses a present inability. It means the same as cannot. I am not able to lift that box.
10. **D** Correct Answer: is able to ✓ Explanation: Is able to describes a present ability that has been gained. He is able to use the software now. The option will be able to is incorrect because we need be after will.

Part 2: Fill in the Gap

11. **A** Correct Answer: was able to ✓ Explanation: We use was able to to talk about a specific achievement in the past. She was able to speak Spanish fluently after months of practice. Could to is incorrect because to never follows modal verbs.
12. **A** Correct Answer: will be able to ✓ Explanation: For future ability, we use will be able to. We cannot say will can because two modal verbs cannot be used together. I will be able to finish the project by Friday.

13. **A** Correct Answer: wasn't able to ✓ Explanation: We use wasn't able to to express inability in the past. Couldn't to is wrong because modal verbs are never followed by to. He wasn't able to lift the heavy box.
14. **A** Correct Answer: will be able to ✓ Explanation: The structure will be able to requires the infinitive marker to before the main verb. The students will be able to write complex essays by next year.
15. **A** Correct Answer: is able to ✓ Explanation: Is able to expresses present ability. Since the context says now, we need the present form. She is able to solve difficult math problems now.
16. **A** Correct Answer: haven't been able to ✓ Explanation: We use haven't been able to with yet to describe an incomplete action in the present perfect. They haven't been able to book the tickets yet.
17. **A** Correct Answer: will be able to ✓ Explanation: In a first conditional sentence (if + present, will + base verb), we use will be able to for future possibility. You will be able to pass the exam easily.
18. **A** Correct Answer: could ✓ Explanation: Could is used to describe a general ability in the past, especially for skills. I could swim when I was five years old. Am able to is present, so it is incorrect here.
19. **A** Correct Answer: was able to ✓ Explanation: When we talk about successfully doing something on a specific occasion in the past, we use was able to, not could. He was able to walk without any help after the operation.
20. **A** Correct Answer: to be able to ✓ Explanation: After would like, we use the full infinitive to + verb, so the correct structure is to be able to. She would like to be able to travel abroad more often.

Part 3: Fill in the Blank

21. **was able to/could** Correct Answer: was able to ✓ Explanation: We use was able to to talk about a past ability. With she, we use was (not were). She was able to speak three languages.
22. **was able to** Correct Answer: was able to ✓ Explanation: Was able to describes a specific past achievement — something successfully done on one occasion. He was able to run a marathon means he managed to do it.
23. **be able to** Correct Answer: be able to ✓ Explanation: After will, we use the base verb be, so the correct form is be able to. Will you be able to come?
24. **been able to** Correct Answer: been able to ✓ Explanation: After have/has/haven't, we use the past participle been. The structure is have/has + been able to. I haven't been able to sleep.
25. **are able to/can** Correct Answer: are able to ✓ Explanation: Are able to expresses a present ability or permission. With they, we use are. They are able to work from home.

26. **be able to** Correct Answer: be able to ✓ Explanation: After to (infinitive), we use the base verb be, giving us to be able to. I hope to be able to speak Spanish.
27. **wasn't able to|couldn't** Correct Answer: wasn't able to ✓ Explanation: Wasn't able to is the negative past form used to say someone failed to do something. He wasn't able to finish means he did not manage it.
28. **am able to|can** Correct Answer: am able to ✓ Explanation: Am able to describes a current ability. With I, we use am. I am able to understand the news shows a skill I have now.
29. **been able to** Correct Answer: been able to ✓ Explanation: The structure has + been able to is the present perfect form of be able to. It shows an ability that continued from the past until now. She has been able to save money.
30. **were able to** Correct Answer: were able to ✓ Explanation: Were able to is used with we/you/they in the past to describe successfully completing a specific action. We were able to get tickets means we managed to get them.

Score Guide

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|----------------------|--|
| 27–30 Correct | Excellent! You have mastered this topic. |
| 23–26 Correct | Very good! Review the rules you missed. |
| 18–22 Correct | Good start. Re-read the lesson and examples. |
| 0–17 Correct | Study the lesson again before retaking the test. |