

# Modals of Ability – Past

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## Grammar Notes

### A. Introduction to Modals

Modals (also known as *modal verbs*) are words that come before the main verb.

Modals give the verb extra meaning, such as:

- ability (*can/could*)
- advice (*should*)
- necessity (*must*)
- possibility (*might*)

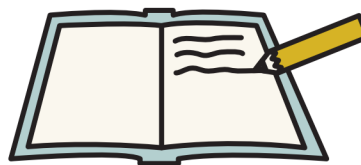
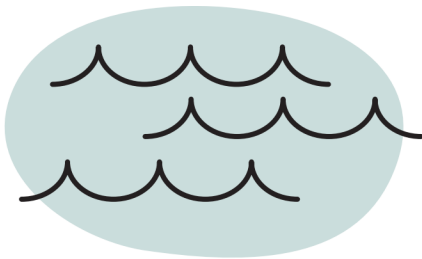
#### Pattern

##### modal + base verb

Modals are always followed by a base verb. A base verb is a verb with **no ending** (-s, -ed, -ing, etc.) added to it.

#### Examples

- I **can** swim.
- He **could swim** when he was a child.
- She **should study**.
- They **must finish** their homework.
- We **might** go to Disneyland next summer.



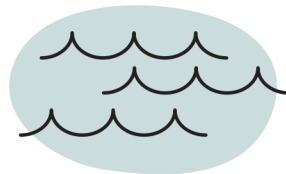
## Grammar Notes cont.

### B. Could

*Could* is a **past** modal of ability.

*Could* describes when someone **was able to do something** in the past.

	Use	Examples
<b>Positive</b>	Use <b>could + base verb</b> when someone <b>was able to do</b> something in the past.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You <b>could sing</b> well when you were a child.</li> <li>He <b>could play the guitar</b> when he was ten years old.</li> <li>Children <b>could play</b> outside five years ago, but it's not safe now.</li> </ul>
<b>Negative</b>	Use <b>could not + base verb</b> when someone <b>was not able to do</b> something. The short form of could not is <b>couldn't</b> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I <b>could not swim</b> when I was young.</li> <li>They <b>couldn't finish</b> their homework last weekend.</li> <li>She <b>couldn't speak</b> French last year, but she can now.</li> </ul>
<b>Question</b>	<p>Use <b>could + subject + base verb</b> to <b>ask if someone was able to do</b> something.</p> <p>Use <b>yes + subject + could</b> or <b>no + subject + couldn't</b> to give a short answer to a question.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Could</b> you <b>understand</b> what the teacher said? Yes, I <b>could</b>. / No, I <b>couldn't</b>.</li> <li><b>Could</b> she <b>play</b> basketball when she was eight years old? Yes, she <b>could</b>. / No, she <b>couldn't</b>.</li> <li><b>Could</b> the students <b>play</b> tennis last year? Yes, they <b>could</b>. / No, they <b>couldn't</b>.</li> </ul>



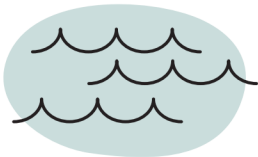
# Exercise 1

## PICTURE DICTIONARY

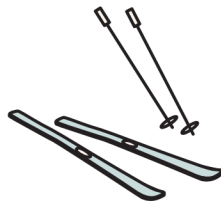
What could you do when you were a child?  
With a partner, talk about what you *could* and *couldn't* do.

**Example:**

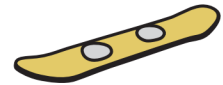
- A: I could swim when I was a child.  
B: I could swim too.
- B: I could ski when I was a teenager.  
A: Oh, I couldn't ski. My parents never took me skiing.
- A: I couldn't snowboard when I was young, but I can now.  
B: I couldn't snowboard when I was a kid, and I still can't.



**swim**



**ski**



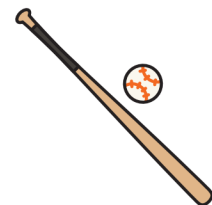
**snowboard**



**skate**



**play basketball**



**play baseball**



**Exercise 1 cont.**



**play tennis**



**play the guitar**



**play the piano**



**use a computer**



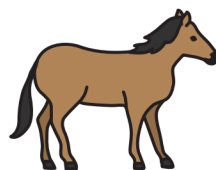
**dance**



**sing**



**ride a bike**



**ride a horse**














**cook**

## Exercise 2

### FILL IN THE BLANKS

Write *could* + *verb* in the blanks.

#	Activity	Sentence
Ex		She _____ <i>could play</i> _____ baseball when she was a child.
1		We _____ when we were young.
2		He _____ a computer when he was five years old.
3		I _____ a horse when I was a little girl.
4		They _____ 15 years ago.
5		I _____ when I was in university.
6		My sister _____ a bike when she was a child.
7		I _____ when I was 18 years old.
8		My classmate _____ basketball when he was in elementary school.
9		My friend _____ well when he was a child.
10		My sister _____ the guitar when she was a teenager.

## Exercise 3

### WRITE THE QUESTIONS

Look at the answers. Then write questions using *could*.

Ex. *Could he cook when he was in university?*

Yes, he could cook when he was in university.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, I could use a computer when I was ten years old.

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, they could ski when they were children.

3. \_\_\_\_\_

No, my brother couldn't dance when he was a kid.

4. \_\_\_\_\_

No, my cousin couldn't play the guitar when she was young.

5. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, she could play basketball when she was a teenager.

6. \_\_\_\_\_

No, I couldn't use a computer when I was two years old.

7. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, he could play baseball when he was in high school.

8. \_\_\_\_\_

No, my friends couldn't snowboard when they were kids.

9. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, I could ride a horse when I was 11 years old.

10. \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, my parents could play tennis 20 years ago.

## Exercise 4

### FIND SOMEONE WHO

Write questions using different ways to express past time (*when you were young, when you were a child, etc.*). Then walk around the classroom and ask your classmates questions. Write your classmate's name on the right if he or she answers "yes."

#	Find someone...	Question	Classmate
1	who could ski.	<i>Could you ski when you were six years old?</i>	
2	who could skate.		
3	who could swim.		
4	who could use a computer.		
5	who could ride a bike.		
6	who could cook.		
7	who could play the piano.		
8	who could play baseball.		
9	who could sing.		
10	who could dance.		



## Exercise 5

### COMPLETE THE STORY

Complete the story by using *can*, *can't*, *could*, or *couldn't* with the verbs below the blanks. Remember that *can* and *can't* are **present** modals of ability and *could* and *couldn't* are **past** modals of ability.

### Then and Now

A lot has changed in the last 100 years. In the past, most people \_\_\_\_\_ because cars  
1. drive, not  
 were new technology and expensive. Many people \_\_\_\_\_ these days because cars are  
2. drive  
 common and more affordable. Most people also \_\_\_\_\_ because there weren't many  
3. fly, not  
 airplanes around 100 years ago. Now we \_\_\_\_\_ almost anywhere in the world!  
4. fly

Most people \_\_\_\_\_ a computer 100 years ago, but they probably  
5. use, not  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a telephone. Nowadays, most people \_\_\_\_\_  
6. use 7. look up  
 anything they want on their computers and cellphones. People \_\_\_\_\_ their phones  
8. use  
 to make calls, send text messages, play games, and take pictures. But they \_\_\_\_\_  
9. travel, not  
 through time. Maybe one day time travel will be something that everyone \_\_\_\_\_ !  
10. do



## Exercise 7

### QUIZ

Circle the correct answer.

1. He couldn't ski when he was a child, but he \_\_\_\_\_ now.  
a) can  
b) could
2. A: Can you ride a horse?  
B: No, I \_\_\_\_\_ .  
a) can't  
b) couldn't
3. I'm afraid of the water because I \_\_\_\_\_ swim.  
a) can't  
b) couldn't
4. They \_\_\_\_\_ play basketball when they were kids.  
a) can  
b) could
5. A: Could you sing well when you were young?  
B: Yes, I \_\_\_\_\_ .  
a) can  
b) could
6. My brother \_\_\_\_\_ play the guitar.  
He plays every night.  
a) can  
b) could
7. I \_\_\_\_\_ dance when I was in high school.  
That's why I'm taking lessons now.  
a) can't  
b) couldn't
8. She \_\_\_\_\_ ride a bicycle when she was only three years old.  
a) can  
b) could
9. He \_\_\_\_\_ play tennis last year, but he can now.  
a) can't  
b) couldn't
10. I couldn't sing well when I was younger, but I \_\_\_\_\_ sing better now.  
a) can  
b) could
11. A: \_\_\_\_\_ he cook?  
B: Yes, he can.  
a) Can  
b) Could
12. She \_\_\_\_\_ speak French when she was in high school, but she can now.  
a) can't  
b) couldn't

# Answer Key

### LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students learn how to use *could* and *couldn't* to describe past abilities. Students will also demonstrate their understanding of when to use present and past modals of ability in context.

**LEVEL:** Low Int

**TIME:** 2 hours

**TAGS:** modals, modal verbs, modals of ability, could, couldn't, can, can't, mixed tenses, grammar, grammar exercises

### Exercise 1

Answers will vary. Have students discuss their past abilities in pairs (following the example) or as a class.

### Exercise 2

- |                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1. could snowboard | 6. could ride  |
| 2. could use       | 7. could cook  |
| 3. could ride      | 8. could play  |
| 4. could skate     | 9. could sing  |
| 5. could dance     | 10. could play |

### Exercise 3

1. Could you use a computer when you were ten years old?
2. Could they ski when they were children?
3. Could your brother dance when he was a kid?
4. Could your cousin play the guitar when she was young?
5. Could she play basketball when she was a teenager?
6. Could you use a computer when you were two years old?
7. Could he play baseball when he was in high school?
8. Could your friends snowboard when they were kids?
9. Could you ride a horse when you were 11 years old?
10. Could your parents play tennis 20 years ago?

### Exercise 4

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct question formation. If your students can handle it, encourage them to ask a follow-up question. For example:

A: Could you ski when you were six years old?

B: Yes, I could.

A: Did you go skiing often?

B: Yes, we went every weekend in the wintertime.

### Exercise 5

- |                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. couldn't drive | 6. could use    |
| 2. can drive      | 7. can look up  |
| 3. couldn't fly   | 8. can use      |
| 4. can fly        | 9. can't travel |
| 5. couldn't use   | 10. can do      |

### Exercise 6

Answers will vary.

### Exercise 7

- |      |      |      |      |       |       |
|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 3. a | 5. b | 7. b | 9. b  | 11. a |
| 2. a | 4. b | 6. a | 8. b | 10. a | 12. b |