

2: Modals of Permission

Asking for permission

It's normal to use 'can' and 'could' to ask for permission. 'Could' is more polite and it very commonly used between adults.

- Can I sit here?
- Could I sit here?

'May' is mostly used between children and parents or teachers. When it's used between adults, it's quite formal.

- May I sit here?

'Might' is now very formal and old fashioned. It's rare to hear it.

- Might I sit here?

'Be allowed to' is mostly used between children and adults. If it's used between adults it's often asking about an outside rule.

- Am I allowed to sit here?

It's possible to use can't and 'couldn't as negative questions. Normally here we mean 'isn't it allowed?' – we are asking the same thing as the normal question, but we are expressing surprise.

- Can't I sit here?
- Couldn't I sit here?

However, if we use 'not' separately and stress it, it's possible to ask for permission not to do something.

- Can I NOT do the report? = is it okay if I don't do the report?
- Could we NOT meet tonight? I'm really tired.

Future permission

It's possible to use 'can' or 'could' with a future time word to ask for future permission.

- Could I borrow your car tomorrow?
- Can we leave at six?

We can also use 'will be allowed to'. This stresses that the person isn't asking permission now but for later.

- Will I be allowed to leave early?

Giving and Refusing Permission

We don't usually use 'could / couldn't' in the reply when someone asks for permission.

- Could I sit here? Yes, you can / no you can't. (NOT: ~~yes you could / no you couldn't~~)

Exception: we can use could in the answer when we are talking about something hypothetical.

- Could I hand in my essay next week?
- Well you could, but then I won't really have time to mark it properly.

It's also possible to use 'must not / mustn't' to tell someone that it's not allowed to do something. See the section about obligation for more about this.

- You mustn't sit there!
- You mustn't come home late.

Normally, we use ‘can’t’ to say that something isn’t allowed. But (in the same way as with negative questions) we sometimes use ‘can ... NOT’ (the stress on ‘not’) to say that it’s okay not to do something.

- You can come to the party or you can **not** come to the party, whatever you like.

Talking about rules and laws in the present / future

We usually use ‘can / can’t’, ‘be allowed to’ and ‘must not’ to talk about rules or laws.

- You can’t travel on the bus without a ticket.
- Everyone can park by the station.
- You’re not allowed to smoke in the theatre.
- You mustn’t park next to the entrance.

More formally, we can use ‘may / may not’ in the same situations, but this is not common.

- Everyone may park by the station.

We also use ‘can / can’t’ and ‘be allowed to’ to talk about permission that has already been given or refused.

- I’m not allowed to go to the party tonight.
- The children can watch TV after dinner.

Talking about rules and laws in the past

To talk about general permission in the past, we use ‘could / couldn’t’ and ‘was / were (not) allowed to’.

- When I was at school, we could go to the gym at lunchtime.
- When I was a child, I couldn’t watch TV in the morning.

However, we don’t use ‘could’ to talk about one particular instance of permission in the past. Instead, we need to use ‘was / were allowed to’.

- Last night, she was allowed to go to the party.
- Not: ~~last night, she could go to the party.~~

It's okay to use both 'couldn't' and 'wasn't / weren't allowed to' for one particular instance though.

- Last night she couldn't go to the party.
- Last night she wasn't allowed to go to the party.

Hypothetical / conditional permission in the present / future

Could = would be allowed to

This is used to talk about permission when we want to use a hypothetical or conditional meaning.

- He could come late. Nobody would mind (= he would be allowed to come late).
- You could stay at home but then I wouldn't be able to do all the work.
- If John came early to help, Lucy could arrive whenever she liked.

Hypothetical / conditional permission in the past

We use 'could + have + past participle' to talk about permission for things that didn't happen in the past. This is used for conditional and hypothetical situations.

- Could I have gone home early? (I didn't go home early but I'm asking if it was allowed.)
- Could we have delayed the meeting? (We didn't delay the meeting but I want to know if it would have been possible.)

We can use could + have + pp in this way to talk about something that would definitely have been allowed in the past, but that didn't happen.

- I don't know why he decided not to come at all. He could have come late.

We also use will/shall for rules e.g. of exams and competitions

- The judge's decision shall be final.

Permission or possibility?

Sometimes it's really hard to know if a sentence with can is about permission or possibility. Often in this situation, it can be both and we have to use the context to decide.

- Can Julie come to the party? (= is Julie allowed to come to the party? Or 'is it possible for Julie to come to the party?')