

CAN AND COULD FOR MAKING REQUESTS

“Can” and “could” are both modal verbs that express ability, possibility, permission, and requests. However, they differ in terms of time, politeness, and degree of certainty. “Can” is used to express present ability or possibility, such as in the sentences “I can swim” and “You can reach me by phone.” On the other hand, “could” is the past tense of “can” and is used to express past ability or possibility. For example, “I could swim when I was a child” and “She could reach the top shelf when she was younger” illustrate this usage.

In terms of politeness, “could” is often considered more polite and formal than “can.” This distinction is particularly important when making requests or asking for permission. For instance, “Can you help me with this?” is less polite compared to “Could you help me with this?” Additionally, “can” implies a higher degree of certainty or direct ability, while “could” often suggests a hypothetical situation or a lower degree of certainty. For example, “We can go to the park if it stops raining” is more certain, whereas “We could go to the park if it stops raining” is less certain and more hypothetical.

Here’s a breakdown of their usage:

Aspect	Can	Could
Time	Present or future ability or possibility.	Past ability or possibility.
Example	“I can swim.”	“I could swim when I was a child.”
Politeness	Less formal and direct.	More polite and formal.
Example	“Can you help me with this?”	“Could you help me with this?”
Certainty	Implies higher certainty or direct ability.	Suggests lower certainty or a hypothetical idea.
Example	“We can leave now if you’re ready.”	“We could leave early if we had enough time.”

Reference:

Proofreading (2024). Can vs. Could: Differences, Definition & Examples. Retrieved from: <https://www.proofreading.co.uk/blog/can-vs-could-learn-the-differences-with-examples/> -
:~:text=“Could” is generally considered more of courtesy in many contexts.