

She might be wrong.

CAN

MAY

Can we go out?

He could drive a car 10 years ago.

I. ABILITY OR POTENTIAL

can, could, be able to

- ◆ Can, could – ability in general potential performance, verbs of senses, mental processes

He can speak German fluently.

I can (could – more tentative) give him an answer now, later, or tomorrow.

Could – equivalent in the past

He could speak German fluently when he was younger.

I could have given him an answer yesterday.

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- ◆ Be able to – ability in general, actual performance –
to manage, to succeed in sth

I was able to give him an answer yesterday.

- ◆ Be able to – used for all other tenses and for the infinitive and perfect forms
 - present **AM/ARE/IS ABLE TO**
 - past **WAS/WERE ABLE TO**
 - present perfect **HAS/HAVE BEEN ABLE TO**
 - future **SHALL/WILL BE ABLE TO**

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- ◆ In negative sentences and in questions, we can use either form.

It was foggy, so the plane couldn't/wasn't able to take off.

I have never been able to make good friends.

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

can, could

- ◆ *Can and could* – a general characteristic or quality

A house in London can cost a lot of money.

He could be very unpleasant when he was angry.

I. PERMISSION

can, could, may, might

- ◆ *Can, may* – giving or asking for permission

You can/may speak to the patient for just a few minutes.

Can/may I speak to you for a moment?

Could/might I speak to you for a moment? (asking tentatively)

II. POSSIBILITY

can, could, may, might

- ◆ Can, may – sometimes interchangeable

A fuller description can/may be found in the reference books listed at the beginning of this book.

- ◆ Might/could – the tentative form of may

I may/might/could be wrong of course. (present)

The two parties may/might/could reach agreement tomorrow. (future)

- ◆ Could - negative sentence

They may/might not reach agreement tomorrow. (not reach!)

They could not reach agreement tomorrow. (could not!)

OTHER USES OF *MAY* AND *MIGHT*

- ◆ **May** – concessive meaning

Your job may be very demanding, but at least it isn't boring.

The work may have been difficult, but at least it was interesting.

- ◆ **Might** – a tentative way of making a request, suggestion or recommendation

You might send me a postcard while you're on holiday.

You might look where you're going!