

können

— DAS MODALVERB KÖNNEN

können is a German modal verb meaning “can / to be able to”: kann · kannst · kann.

können is easy to conjugate: **ich and er/sie/es have the same form**. The main verb goes to the end of the sentence as an infinitive.

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01 00:00

Conjugation table

With modal verbs, the **ich** and **er/sie/es** forms are **exactly the same**, and they take no ending.

Learn this rule once and you will see the same pattern in every modal verb (können, müssen, wollen ...). English does the same thing: “I can, he can” — no -s.

PERSON	VERB
ich	kann
du	kannst
er/sie/es	kann
wir	können
ihr	könnt
sie/Sie	können

The ich and er/sie/es forms are identical and take no ending.

02 01:10

When to use it

können expresses ability, and in everyday speech permission too; in formal writing **dürfen** is preferred for permission.

GERMAN	ENGLISH	SITUATION
Ich kann schwimmen .	I can swim .	Ability
Du kannst heute kommen .	You can come today .	Permission (everyday)
Er kann gut kochen .	He can cook well .	Ability
Wir können morgen fahren .	We can go tomorrow .	Plan / possibility

These sentences show the ability and permission uses.

03 02:20

The four jobs of können

The dictionary says “can”, but in everyday German können does four different jobs. If you do not know which one you are in, you will mistake a polite request for a question about ability — just like English “Can you help me?”.

JOB	EXAMPLE	ENGLISH
1 - Ability	Ich kann schwimmen .	I can swim . (I learned how)
2 - Possibility	Heute kann ich nicht kommen .	I can't come today . (circumstances do not allow it)
3 - Request	Können Sie mir helfen?	Could you help me?
4 - Permission (everyday)	Kann ich hier sitzen?	Can I sit here?

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Sentence structure

In a main clause the modal verb is conjugated in **second position** and the main verb goes **to the end as an infinitive**.
In a question the modal verb moves to the **front**, and in a negative sentence **nicht** goes **before** the main verb.

TYPE	GERMAN	ENGLISH
Statement	Ich kann schwimmen .	I can swim .
Question	Kannst du schwimmen?	Can you swim?
Negative	Ich kann nicht schwimmen .	I can't swim .

In a question the modal verb moves to the front; in a negative sentence “nicht” goes before the main verb.

Where people mix things up: dürfen vs können

können = ability / (everyday) permission; dürfen = formal permission.

In everyday speech either one can be used for permission — much like “can I?” versus “may I?” in English — but in formal and written contexts only **dürfen** is correct.

GERMAN	ENGLISH	NOTE
Darf ich hier rauchen?	May I smoke here?	Formal request for permission
Kann ich hier rauchen?	Can I smoke here?	Everyday way to ask permission

In formal writing, 'dürfen' is preferred for permission.

Traps



TRAP 01

A conjugated verb instead of the infinitive

After a modal verb the main verb must be an **infinitive**; a conjugated form is not allowed.

✗ **Ich kann schwimmt.**

schwimmt is conjugated (3rd person singular); it should be the infinitive “schwimmen”.

✓ **Ich kann schwimmen.**

I can swim.



TRAP 02

Adding zu

English often says “to” (“I want to go”, “I’m able to swim”), but in German **zu** never follows a modal verb; the infinitive stands on its own.

✗ **Ich kann zu schwimmen.**

'zu' is unnecessary and wrong.

✓ **Ich kann schwimmen.**

I can swim.



TRAP 03

Using kann for a past ability

To talk about an ability in the past, use **konnte** (Präteritum), not **kann**.

✗ **Ich kann gestern schwimmen.**

Tense mismatch; 'kann' is present tense.

✓ **Ich konnte gestern schwimmen.**

I was able to swim yesterday.

07 07:00

The other modal verbs

08 07 : 30

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

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