

Lesson 2 / Handout 2e - KEY

Complete the sentences with one of the words below:

impossibility (2x) for about general negatively present perfect polite present
can (2x) may might could (2x) may not (2x) extra quick reported achievement
ironically past success be able to

a) In asking **for PERMISSION**, *may* is more **polite** than *can*. They are replaced by *might* or *could* when the speaker is being **extra** polite.

Might can also be used **ironically**.

b) In asking **about PERMISSION**, *can*, not *may*, is used:

Can you (= Are you allowed to) drive your parents' car?

c) For **PROHIBITION**, the use of *may not* instead of *cannot* is chiefly limited to **quick** responses to *may*:

A: 'May I go there?' B: 'No, you **may not!**'

Could not expresses **past** prohibition.

d) *Can* expressing **ABILITY** is replaced by *could* when:

- there is **NO** reference to an actual, specific **achievement** or **success in the past**; *could* only expresses **past ability (natural and learned)**, not related to any specific event

- in a context of **non-fact**: *I could come if I wanted. I wish I could come.*

- in **reported** speech: *He said he could see me next week.*

e) For **past ABILITY** which suggests **the successful completion of a specific action** (actual achievement or success), *could* is replaced by the past or present perfect tense of **be able to** (or also *manage to, succeed in + -ing*).

f) **Past INABILITY**, whether or not reference is made to a specific action, can be expressed by *couldn't* as well as by the past tense of *not be able to / be unable to*.

Nevertheless, like *could*, *couldn't* cannot replace the **present perfect** tense.

g) *May* is replaced by *might* or *could* to express less **POSSIBILITY**. All three cover **present possibility** with reference to the future, present or past.

May not & might not express **possibility negatively**.

Could not expresses **impossibility**.

h) *Can* covers **general POSSIBILITY** without reference to past, present or future. *Could* covers **past possibility** and possibility in a context of **non-fact**.

i) *Cannot* expresses **general impossibility** and *could not* expresses **past impossibility** and impossibility in a context of **non-fact**.

j) *Could* is often used in **polite REQUESTS** x *couldn't* can be used in **not-so-polite REQUESTS**:

Could you lend me this book? X *Couldn't you lend me this book?*