

English Ladder

Student Workbook

Explanation of "Was able to" vs. "Could"

A polished self-study handout designed for print or tablet use. Read the concept, notice the pattern, and then complete the matching practice set on your own.



Grammar Concepts #35

Key Points

Assurance Against Confusion:

Visual anchor

Use the concept poster to spotlight the main language pattern in **Explanation of "Was able to" vs. "Could"** and keep the explanation visible during practice and discussion.

ENGLISH LADDER

Concept #35 ► **Was able to vs Could**

We do not use "could" for something accomplished in the past. Instead we use "was able to".

Past	Past	Future	Future
"was able to" Past Accomplishment	"could have" Past Possibility	"could" + "if" Future Possibility	"can" + "if"/"when" Future Certainty
I was able to pass the exam.	I could have passed the exam if I had studied.	I could pass the exam if I study.	I can pass the exam if I study.
He was able to buy a car.	He could have bought a car if he had worked harder.	He could buy a car if he works harder.	He can buy a car if he works harder.
They were able to talk to Tom.	They could have talked to Tom if they had gone to his party.	They could talk to Tom if they go to his party.	They can talk to Tom when they go to his party.

You can also use "would have been able to talk" here.

You can also use "may be able to" here.

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Core Idea

Concept Overview: The image discusses the correct usage of "was able to" versus "could" in different contexts, particularly when referring to past events. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for expressing ideas accurately in English, especially when dealing with past accomplishments, possibilities, and future scenarios. Let's explore these concepts in depth, and provide clarity on when to use each form, addressing common confusions non-native speakers may have.

Quick reference

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| 1. Past Accomplishment | Examples: Correct: I was able to pass the exam. (Meaning: I succeeded in passing the exam. It is a confirmed achievement.)
Correct: He was able to buy a car. (Meaning: He managed to buy a car, and it happened.)
Correct: They were able to talk to Tom. (Meaning: They successfully talked to Tom.) |
| 2. Past Possibility | Examples: Correct: I could have passed the exam if I had studied. (Meaning: It was possible for me to pass, but since I didn't study, I did not pass.)
Correct: He could have bought a car if he had worked harder. (Meaning: It was possible for him to buy a car, but he didn't work hard enough, so it didn't happen.)
Correct: They could have talked to Tom if they had gone to his party. (Meaning: They had the opportunity to talk to Tom, but because they didn't go to the party, the conversation didn't happen.) |
| 3. Future Possibility | Examples: Correct: I could pass the exam if I study. (Meaning: It's possible for me to pass the exam, but it depends on whether I study.)
Correct: He could buy a car if he works harder. (Meaning: It's possible for him to buy a car, but only if he works harder.)
Correct: They could talk to Tom if they go to his party. (Meaning: It's possible for them to talk to Tom, but only if they attend his party.) |
| 4. Future Certainty | Examples: Correct: I can pass the exam if I study. (Meaning: I'm confident that I will pass the exam, provided that I study.)
Correct: He can buy a car if he works harder. (Meaning: He will definitely be able to buy a car if he puts in the effort to work harder.)
Correct: They can talk to Tom when they go to his party. (Meaning: They will definitely have the chance to talk to Tom once they attend his party.) |

Key Points



1. Past Accomplishment

When referring to something that was successfully accomplished in the past, the phrase "was able to" (or "were able to" for plural subjects) is used. This phrase indicates not just the possibility of an action, but the fact that the action actually happened.

- Examples: Correct: I was able to pass the exam. (Meaning: I succeeded in passing the exam. It is a confirmed achievement.) Correct: He was able to buy a car. (Meaning: He managed to buy a car, and it happened.) Correct: They were able to talk to Tom. (Meaning: They successfully talked to Tom.)
- Common Confusion: You might be tempted to use "could" here, thinking that since it's in the past, "could" would be appropriate. However, "could" in the past does not necessarily imply that the action was completed. For instance, "I could pass the exam" could mean that it was possible for you to pass, but doesn't clarify whether you actually did pass. This ambiguity is why "was able to" is preferred when the action was completed. Incorrect: I could pass the exam. (This is incorrect if you are trying to say that you passed the exam. It only suggests the possibility, not the accomplishment.)

2. Past Possibility

When you want to discuss something that was possible in the past but did not actually happen, the correct phrase is "could have." This construction is used to talk about hypothetical situations or missed opportunities.

- Examples: Correct: I could have passed the exam if I had studied. (Meaning: It was possible for me to pass, but since I didn't study, I did not pass.) Correct: He could have bought a car if he had worked harder. (Meaning: It was possible for him to buy a car, but he didn't work hard enough, so it didn't happen.) Correct: They could have talked to Tom if they had gone to his party. (Meaning: They had the opportunity to talk to Tom, but because they didn't go to the party, the conversation didn't happen.)
- Common Confusion: Students might mistakenly use "was able to" when referring to missed opportunities. However, "was able to" implies that the action actually occurred, which contradicts the hypothetical nature of the situation. Always use "could have" to discuss possibilities that did not materialize. Incorrect: I was able to pass the exam if I had studied. (This is incorrect because it suggests that you actually passed the exam, which isn't the case.)

3. Future Possibility

When discussing something that might happen in the future, we use "could" combined with a condition, usually introduced by "if." This structure expresses that the action is possible but depends on certain conditions being met.

- Examples: Correct: I could pass the exam if I study. (Meaning: It's possible for me to pass the exam, but it depends on whether I study.) Correct: He could buy a car if he works harder. (Meaning: It's possible for him to buy a car, but only if he works harder.) Correct: They could talk to Tom if they go to his party. (Meaning: It's possible for them to talk to Tom, but only if they attend his party.)



- **Common Confusion:** Some students may confuse "could" with "can" when discussing future possibilities. Remember, "could" suggests that the action is possible but not guaranteed. "Can" is stronger and suggests a higher likelihood or certainty. Incorrect: I can pass the exam if I study. (This is correct for expressing strong certainty, but incorrect if you only want to suggest a possibility.)

4. Future Certainty

To express something that will definitely happen in the future if a specific condition is met, we use "can" with an "if" or "when" clause. This indicates that the action is not just possible but very likely or even certain.

- **Examples:** Correct: I can pass the exam if I study. (Meaning: I'm confident that I will pass the exam, provided that I study.) Correct: He can buy a car if he works harder. (Meaning: He will definitely be able to buy a car if he puts in the effort to work harder.) Correct: They can talk to Tom when they go to his party. (Meaning: They will definitely have the chance to talk to Tom once they attend his party.)
- **Common Confusion:** "Can" can sometimes be mistakenly used to talk about general possibilities rather than certainties. Use "could" if the outcome is uncertain and "can" if you are confident about the future action. Incorrect: He could buy a car if he works harder. (This is correct if you're suggesting a possibility, but if you're certain, "can" would be better.)

Assurance Against Confusion:

It's completely normal to feel unsure when choosing between "could" and "was able to" in past contexts, especially because in many languages, the equivalent of "could" is used for both possibilities and accomplishments. The key difference in English is that "was able to" specifically denotes a successful action, while "could" (in the past) often implies that something was possible, but it's unclear if it happened or not.

To simplify:

- If the action was successfully completed in the past, use "was able to."
- If it was possible but didn't happen, use "could have."
- For future possibilities, use "could."
- For future certainties, use "can."

By following these guidelines, you'll become more confident in expressing past and future actions clearly and accurately in English. Remember, practice and careful attention to the context will help you master these subtle differences.