

# 24 Past abilities

In the past simple, "can" becomes "could."  
You often use it to talk about things you  
"could" do in the past, but can't do now.

 **New language** Using "could" in the past simple

**Aa Vocabulary** Abilities and pastimes

 **New skill** Talking about past abilities

## 24.1 KEY LANGUAGE "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

Use "could" to talk about an ability you once had. You can  
use "when" plus a time setting to say when you had the ability.



I **can't** climb trees now, but I **could** when I was younger.

You can use the present  
simple for contrast.

Set the time frame with a phrase  
about an age, day, or year.

The statement can be positive using "could" or  
negative using "couldn't." It doesn't change with  
the subject.



## 24.2 FURTHER EXAMPLES "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

When I was a student, I **could** study all night before an exam.



I **couldn't** go to China last year because it was too expensive.



When Milo was eight, he **could** play the violin.



Last year, she **couldn't** run very far, but yesterday she ran a marathon.



## 24.3 HOW TO FORM "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

"WHEN"

TIME SETTING

"COULD"

ABILITY

When

I was younger,

I **could**  
I **couldn't**

climb trees.

Begin with  
"when."

This phrase sets the  
time in the past when  
the action was possible.

The statement can be  
positive or negative.

Use the base form of the  
verb for the past ability.



## 24.4 REWRITE THESE SENTENCES IN THE PAST SIMPLE USING "COULD"

I **can** ski.

*I could ski.*

- 1 I **can** cook Italian food.
- 2 We **can't** play the piano.
- 3 She **can** paint a picture.
- 4 They **can't** make a cake.



## 24.5 LISTEN TO THE AUDIO AND MARK THE CORRECT ANSWERS

When Diana was five, she couldn't...

write music ☒

read music ☐

play the piano. ☐

2 When Imelda was seven, she could...

ride a horse ☐

drive a car ☐

fly a plane. ☐

1 When Louis was four, he could...

read ☐

write ☐

do mathematics. ☐

3 When Irina was four, she could speak...

one language ☐

two languages ☐

three languages. ☐



## 24.6 USE THE CHART TO CREATE 16 CORRECT SENTENCES AND SAY THEM OUT LOUD

*When I was five,  
I couldn't play  
chess.*



When I was  
When you were

Start with a  
"when" phrase.

five,  
seven,

Choose  
an age.

I couldn't  
you could

Choose a positive or  
negative statement.

play chess.  
ride a bike.  
swim.  
skate.

Finish with  
an ability.



## 24 CHECKLIST



Using "could" in the past simple ☐



Abilities and pastimes ☐



Talking about past abilities ☐