

Permission (Can/Could/May/Might)



Asking for permission

- ◆ **Can/Could/May/Might I ...?** = Do you/Would you mind if ...?
Could and **may** are more polite than **can**. **Might** is formal. **May** and **Might** are used to ask for permission when we do not know the other person very well. We normally reply with: 'Certainly./' 'Of course./' 'Why not?/' 'No, I'm afraid you can't.'
 e.g. 'Can I use your pen for a minute?' 'Of course.'
 'May I see the manager, please?' 'Certainly.'

Giving permission

- ◆ **can/may** = you are allowed to do sth (can - informal, may - formal)
May is usually used in writing.
 e.g. You **may** make a phone call here.
We do not use could or might to give permission.
 e.g. 'Could I borrow your dictionary?' 'Yes, you **can**.'
 'Yes, you **may**.' (NOT: Yes, you ~~could~~.)

Refusing permission

- ◆ **can't/mustn't/may not** = you are not allowed to do sth
May not is formal and is usually used in writing.
 e.g. I'm sorry, but you **can't/mustn't** use the fax.
 Customers **may not** enter this area.
We do not use couldn't to refuse permission.
 e.g. 'Could I stay a little longer?' 'I'm sorry, but you **can't**.' (NOT: I'm sorry, but you ~~couldn't~~.)

Talking about permission

- ◆ We use **can** and **be allowed to** to refer to laws or regulations.
 e.g. All citizens over the age of 18 **can/are allowed to** vote. (law)

There is a difference in meaning between **may** and **be allowed to** in questions.

Study the examples:

- e.g. a) **May I** use your phone? (= Will you allow me to use your phone?)
 b) **Are we allowed to** use the office phone? (= What is the rule?)

- ◆ We use **could** or **was/were allowed to** to say that we had general permission to do something in the past.

We use **was/were allowed to** and not **could**, to say that we had permission to do something in a particular situation in the past.

e.g. I **could/was allowed to** go to parties when I was young. (I was allowed to go to parties in general.)

BUT: I **was allowed to** go to John's party last night. (NOT: I ~~could~~ go ... as this is a particular situation.)

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Fill in the gaps with **could** or **was/were allowed to**.

- 1 The children ...**were allowed to**... go to the cinema on their own yesterday.
- 2 When I was young, we wear whatever we liked to school.
- 3 Peter watch a concert on TV last night, although it was on quite late.
- 4 When we were children, we play outside until it got dark.
- 5 Yesterday, we bring our favourite toys to school.
- 6 When Dennis lived with his parents, he come in at whatever time he liked.

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Underline the correct word(s).

- 1 A: Could I sleep at my friend's house tonight?
 B: Yes, of course you **could/can**.
- 2 A: I **could/was allowed to** go to the disco last night.
 B: Was it good fun?
- 3 A: **Can/Might** I have a biscuit please, Mum?
 B: Of course. Help yourself.
- 4 A: Excuse me, sir. **May I/Am I allowed to** leave the room?
 B: Yes, but don't be too long.
- 5 A: **Must/Might** I borrow these files for a moment, sir?
 B: Certainly. Take whatever you need.
- 6 A: Might I use your pen?
 B: Of course you **may/might**.
- 7 A: **May I/Am I allowed to** park in the company car park?
 B: Of course you are!