

What are Modal Verbs for Ability?

Worksheet

Modal verbs express ability in different time frames: 'can' (present general ability), 'could' (past general ability), 'be able to' (specific achievement or possibility in any time). Each shows a distinct relationship between person and action.

Questions

1. She ____ ride a bike when she was five.
A) can
B) could
C) is able to
D) was able to
2. Despite the injury, he ____ finish the race.
A) can
B) could
C) is able to
D) was able to
3. Negative: 'I ____ see anything in the dark.'
A) can't
B) couldn't
C) am not able to
D) wasn't able to
4. He ____ speak five languages fluently.
A) is able to
B) was able to
C) can
D) could
5. Use 'can', 'could', or 'be able to': 'When I was young, I ____ speak three languages.'
6. Complete: 'Despite the noise, she ____ concentrate on her work.'
7. Complete: 'She ____ play the piano very well.'
8. Define: When do you use 'can'?
9. Define: When do you use 'could'?
10. Define: What does 'be able to' emphasize?

Answer Key

1. B) could — 'Could' expresses general past ability (skill she had).
2. D) was able to — 'Was able to' emphasizes achievement (he overcame difficulty).
3. A) can't — Present negative: 'can't' (cannot see now).
4. C) can — Present general ability: 'can'.
5. Time: past (when I was young) Ability type: general past ability Correct form: could Result: When I was young, I could speak three languages.
6. Verb phrase: manage to concentrate (specific achievement) Time: past Correct form: was able to (emphasizes achievement) Result: Despite the noise, she was able to concentrate on her work.
7. Time: present Ability type: general present ability Correct form: can Result: She can play the piano very well.
8. To express general present ability. 'I can swim' — I have the skill right now.
9. To express general past ability. 'She could speak French' — she had that skill in the past.
10. Specific achievement or overcoming an obstacle. 'He was able to escape' emphasizes that he succeeded despite difficulty.

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