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## Can and may for permission

The terms “can,” “may,” and “could” are often used interchangeably. But is this correct? Well, the difference between these words is often a matter of formality, but it depends on how you use them. Read on to find out why English has so many terms for expressing possibility and making requests!Expressing Possibilities“Can,” “may,” and “could” are all modal verbs used to express the possibility of something. To suggest a strong possibility, for instance, we use “can”:Vitamin C can boost your immune system.Using “can” in this way suggests not just a possibility, but a likelihood. However, if we were less certain, we would use “may” or “could” instead:Vitamin C may boost your immune system.Vitamin C could boost your immune system.The difference between these terms lies in how strong a claim we want to make. We can also make a stronger claim by using the verb “will” or not using a modal verb at all. For example:Vitamin C will boost your immune system.Vitamin C boosts your immune system.Both of these last sentences suggest that vitamin C is certain to improve your immune system, not that it is simply likely or possible that it will do so.Making Requests and Granting PermissionThe other situation in which “can,” “may,” and “could” can all be used is to make a request. In this case, the only difference is between how formal they are. For example, we could use these terms as follows:May I have a lemon? = Very formalCould I have a lemon? = Less formalCan I have a lemon? = InformalAll these sentences are ways of asking for a lemon, but the first is politer and more formal than the others. In everyday language where formality isn’t an issue, “can” is the most common of these terms. But you may want to use “may” if you’re making a very formal request.Since you asked so nicely, if we are granting permission for something, meanwhile, we can use either “can” or “may.” As with making a request, “may” is much more formal than “can” in this context, but they essentially mean the same.Summary: Can, May or Could?Whether these terms are interchangeable depends on how you use them: Discussing a Possibility: “Can” suggests a strong possibility or a general truth. “May” and “could” suggest we are less certain about something. Asking for Permission: You can use all three words to ask for permission. To be formal, though, you should use “may” instead of “could” or “can.”And if you need any more help ensuring you use the right words in the right places, try our proofreading service for free today! Strictly speaking, can is an auxiliary verb that is used to express mental and physical capability. May is an auxiliary verb that is used to express permission. However, the sharp dividing line between the use of can and may has eroded, due to the English language’s seeming evolution toward informality.Today, can is used to express mental and physical capability and in informal circumstances, it expresses permission. A child might ask a teacher, “May I have an apple?” as the child is asking a superior if he will be allowed to receive an apple. A child might ask another child, “Can I have an apple?” as he is speaking to a peer.May is more polite than can, it is used in situations of courtesy, formality and making requests of superiors in age or rank.Examples “I am bringing this action to ensure that legally supported expenditures can continue to be made and to address the question of how the state payroll is legally managed during the budget impasse,” Madigan said in a statement. (Huffington Post) Ekin company says the vehicle-mounted system is a state-of-the-art and unique product, which can scan all the number plates of vehicles within its effective range through 180-degrees and match the speeds of the vehicles to their number plates. (Daily Mail) Can I leave my child home alone? (Marshfield News-Herald) Can I Throw This Student Loan Back to My Ex-Wife? (Huffington Post) May I get back to you within two hours to determine next steps?” (U.S. News & World Report) May I Lie to My Husband to Get Him to See a Doctor? (The New York Times) May I also remind you that Sharma’s predecessor Dr DK Sakale was also found dead in similar suspicious circumstances, when his body was found burnt to death,” Surjewala told reporters. (First Post) When we ask for, give, and refuse permission, the words we most often use are can and can’t: Can I speak to Dave Williams, please? You can help yourselves to tea and coffee. I’m sorry, you can’t smoke here. You’ve probably also heard may used in requests and when giving/refusing permission: May I take a message? Passengers may not leave the airport while waiting for a connecting flight. So what’s the difference between can and may in requests? 1. May is more formal than can when asking for and giving permission: May I speak to Mr Jones, please? 2. We use may when we want to sound more polite: May I offer you another drink, sir? 3. We see or hear may, not can, in official announcements, and on signs: Hotel guests may use the gym from 6 a.m. May vs. can = formal vs. informal Look at the difference between these two signs: Watch out! Although we very often shorten cannot to can’t, the contraction mayn’t (may not) is rarely used nowadays. Stick with can’t in spoken English when you refuse permission or say that something isn’t allowed. For more examples, see Grammar rules: modal verbs for expressing permission, or take a look at this British Council page, which has some example sentences. Feel free to ask questions in the comments below! The authorities must do something about the traffic congestion. John’s not here yet. He must be stuck in traffic. To understand the difference in meaning of these two examples it’s best to look at modal verbs using the words intrinsic and extrinsic which are often used to describe modal verbs. Intrinsic meanings are meanings which give the idea that people have some control over the actions or events. These meanings can be put into groups like permission, necessity and willingness. Extrinsic meanings are meanings where people express their ideas or thoughts about what is or isn’t going to happen. These meanings can be put into groups like possibility or prediction. So, ‘The authorities must do something about the traffic congestion’. The meaning of ‘must’ is intrinsic and describes a necessity. And ‘John’s not here yet. He must be stuck in traffic’. The meaning of ‘must’ here is extrinsic and describes certainty or a real possibility. May and Might – possibility The verbs ‘may’ and ‘might’ are used to say that something is possibly true: I think I might be coming down with the flu. That may be a better solution. In informal situations ‘might’ is more common than ‘may’ when we want to talk about what someone will do in the future: They might move to London. I might go out tonight. ‘May’ is more commonly used in formal situations: The price of the property may go up in the future. ‘May’ is not usually used in questions asking about how true something could possibly be: How possible is it for you to come first? Are you likely to win? And not ‘May you win?’ ‘May’ and ‘might’ – permission Usually ‘may’ is used to talk about permission in formal situations: Laptops and tablets may not be used during the test. Only hotel guests may use the facilities. ‘May’ is used for formal requests: May I ask a question? May I come in? Part 2 - Modals B – must/have to (Necessity – Deduction) Part 3 - Modals C – should/ought to (Obligation and Probability) Lesson by Tristan, English teacher at EC Malta English school Decide if these sentences denote Permission, Possibility In the conversation below, Alice Ames, Dan Dole and Rita Ross are speaking informally. This is acceptable in some office environments but not in others. Some employers require employees to be more formal, especially in workplace situations where employees interact with clients and customers. ALICE: Hey, Dan. Can I talk to you? DAN: Sure. Come on in and have a seat. ALICE: Do you mind if I take my two-week vacation at the end of May? DAN: The end of May is busy for us. Can you take it the first two weeks of May? ALICE: My cousin is getting married on May 21. I don’t think I can ask her to change it. DAN: Oh, I see. Of course not. Let me ask Rita if she can step in for you. DAN: Rita, can you come to my office. RITA: One moment. I’m talking with a customer. DAN: (later) Rita, can you cover the last two weeks in May for Alice? RITA: Yeah, I think so. Can I talk to my babysitter first? I’ll need to arrange childcare. DAN: OK. Why don’t you get back to me tomorrow with your answer. RITA: I’ll let you know as soon as I can. DAN: Thanks. Although, traditionally, can has meant “to be able” and may has meant “to be permitted” or to express possibility, both can and may are commonly used interchangeably (especially in spoken, informal language) in respect to permission. Even the Oxford English dictionary informs us that the permission use of can is not incorrect, but it’s better and more polite to use may in formal situations. Example: He can hold his breath for 30 seconds. Meaning: He is able to hold his breath for 30 seconds. Example: He may hold his breath for 30 seconds. Meaning #1: It is possible that he will hold his breath. Meaning #2: He has permission to hold his breath. (This meaning is unlikely.) Example: May/Can I go to the mall tonight? Regardless of whether you choose can or may here, it is clear that permission is being requested. In spoken English, a request for permission is generally answered with can, cannot, or can’t, rather than with may or may not, even if the question was formed using may. (Although mayn’t is a word, it looks and sounds strange even to native speakers.) Example of Dialogue: “May I go to the mall tonight?” “No, you can’t/cannot go.” OR “Yes, you can go.” Occasionally, you may hear someone say something like, “I cannot but argue when you say such silly things.” The expression cannot but argue is actually an old-fashioned way of saying “cannot help arguing.” You may also hear the expression can but, which means “can only.” Example: We can but do our best to arrive on time. Pop Quiz 1. Can/May you imagine a world without war? 2. Can/May I call you for a date? 3. She can/may run faster than anyone else on the team. (able to) Pop Quiz Answers 1. Can you imagine a world without war? 2. Can OR May I call you for a date? 3. She can run faster than anyone else on the team. If the article or the existing discussions do not address a thought or question you have on the subject, please use the “Comment” box at the bottom of this page. Modal verbs: “may,” “might,” “can,” “could,” and “ought” A reader asked for some guidance on using the modal verbs “may,” “might,” “can,” “could,” and “ought.” Editor Emily Brewster responds: The entries for each of these include the complete definitions, as well as many example sentences, so I will discuss here only the aspects of each that I think are likely to cause confusion. These verbs are all modal verbs, which means that they are generally used in combination with other verbs, and are used to change the verb’s meaning to something different from simple fact. Modals express possibility, ability, prediction, permission, and necessity. “Ought” is probably the simplest of this set of modal verbs. It’s almost always followed by “to” and the infinitive form of a verb. It means the same thing as “should,” and is used in the same ways, although “ought” is less common and a bit more formal. A few examples of “ought” are “We ought to be home by noon,” which means “I expect that we will be home by noon,” and “I ought to fix that,” which means “I should fix that.” “May,” “might,” and “could” can all be used to say that something is possible, as in “The story may/might/could be true” or “The painting may/might/could be very old.” You can use any of the three in contexts like these. “May” and “might” can both be used to say that one thing is true but that something else is also true, as in “This car may/might be more expensive than the other cars, but it will be cheaper to maintain.” (If we used “could” instead of “may” or “might” here the sentence would mean that it is not certain that the car is more expensive than the other cars.) Both “may” and “can” are used to indicate that something is allowed, but “may” is more formal: “You may leave whenever you like” is more formal than “You can go whenever you want to.” Children are often taught that only “may” is used for permission, and that “can” is used only for ability. (For example, a child may ask a question like “Can I go outside?” and the responding adult might correct the child by saying that the child is able to go outside, but must ask permission by using “may.”) “Can,” however, is often used for permission. “Can,” “may,” and “could” are all used to make requests. “May” is formal in these contexts, while “can” and “could” appear mainly in speech: “May I have your attention?” is more formal than “Can I have your attention?” or “Could I have your attention?” Making matters even more confusing, I think, is that two of the modal verbs we’re discussing are, aside from being modal verbs in their own rights, the past tense forms of two of the others: “might” can be used as the past tense of “may,” and “could” is the past tense of “can.” “Might” functions as the past tense of “may” mostly in formal contexts, as in “Generously, the senator inquired as to whether she might be of any help to us.” (The usual way of expressing past tense with “may” is “may” followed by “have” and a past participle. The sentence “It may take longer than they expect it to,” becomes “It may have taken longer than they expected it to.”) “Could” is the usual past tense of “can.” “We could see the ocean from the window of the cabin.” (see also the usage note at “can”) For further guidance on these verbs, check the entries for each. Can and may can both be used to ask for permission, although “may” is considered more formal. “May” is the older word and has meanings that refer to the ability to do something, the possibility of something, as well as granting permission. “Can” first overlapped with the definition of “the ability to do something,” and later took the “permission” definition as well. We all know the joke (or, rather, “joke”): a student raises their hand and asks the teacher “Can I go to the bathroom?” and the teacher responds, “I don’t know—can you?” A young student prepares to debunk Charles Lurie’s outdated style guide, “How to Say It: Helpful Hints On English.” Yes, you ‘can’ go to the bathroom. The “joke” here is based on the insistence that you should use may when asking for permission to do something, and can when speaking about ability. By this logic, the student should have said “May I go to the bathroom?” since their ability to use the facilities is likely not in question. But the reality of the situation is that both can and may have been used historically to refer to permission and continue to be used so today. How did we end up in this situation? Origin and Meaning of ‘May’ May is the earlier verb, showing up in manuscripts from the 8th century. It originally referred to having strength or power, and then very quickly developed a meaning that referred to ability. This particular meaning is no longer in current use, but we find a late representative of this use in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales from 1395: “We mowen nat...It ouertake, it slit awey so faste” (“We may not overtake it, it slid away so fast”). May also developed a meaning referring to possibility, which we’re still familiar with today (“I may be able to have lunch with you this Thursday”), and the meaning that schoolteachers insist it has today—one that grants permission (“You may use the bathroom”). All four of these meanings were in use before 1000AD. Overlap with ‘Can’ Around that time, can came on the scene. It was a verb that originally meant “to know,” and then “to know how to do something,” and then “to have the ability to do something.” This last meaning, which showed up around 1300, was can’s first semantic overlap with may. The overlap continued: by 1500, both can and may were used to refer to ability and possibility. Given that there was already some overlap between the two words, it’s not surprising that by the end of the 1800s, can also came to mean “to have permission.” (If there’s anything surprising in that, it’s perhaps that it took so long for can to copy that meaning of may’s.) It didn’t take too long for teachers and grammarians of the day to proscribe that can should only be used of ability and may of permission. We find the rule spelled out clearly (complete with a fictional student-teacher exchange) in Charles Lurie’s 1926 How To Say It: Helpful Hints On English. There is no particular reason for the rule, except for the fact that may has been used longer to mean “to give permission” than can has. Nonetheless, the “rule” lives on. In reality, can likely has more use in the “permission” sense than is recorded, as it is more informal and so shows up in speech more frequently than may does. May is the more formal word, and if you are at all concerned about being tut-tutted, a safe choice. Can is now the verb of choice for ability, and both can and may are still used in the “possibility” sense. You may use can if you wish, and you can use may if it makes you feel better.

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