
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The Grammar Gameshow

Can

Will

Hello, and welcome to today's Grammar Gameshow! I'm your host, Will! If a toucan can cancan, then two toucans can cancan too! And of course, let's not forget Leslie, our all-knowing voice in the sky.

Leslie

Hello, everyone!

Will

Tonight we're going to ask you three questions about...

Leslie

Can! That tiny modal verb with such a range of meanings!

Will

OK! Now, let's meet our contestants!

Bill

Hello, all. My name is Bill!

Will

And contestant number two?

Denise

It's nice to meet you. I'm Denise!

Will

OK, let's get going, and don't forget you can play along at home too. Round one. Can is a modal verb with many uses. I'm going to give you the use and you have to give me an example. Ready? Can for permission.

Bill

You can sit wherever you like.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Can for a request.

Denise

Can Dad pick me up from school today?

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Can for a possibility.

Bill

We can't be lost! We've got a map!

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Can for an ability.

Denise

I can hold my breath for two minutes.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Wow! Two minutes, eh? Well, go ahead. Prove it!

Denise

What?

Will

Two minutes you said. If you want any points, you're going to have to prove it. Ready? Go! And now for a surprise bonus question. True or false: 'Can' can be used to talk about typical or common behaviour, just like the present simple. It's not two minutes yet!

Bill

True.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Use this sentence to give us an example: John is often quite rude.

Bill

John can be quite rude at times.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

It's not two minutes yet! Leslie?

Leslie

Good job! Can and can't are modal verbs meaning they're always followed by an infinitive and don't change to show person or time. They are useful verbs, and can be used to talk about permissions, requests and offers, possibility and impossibility, abilities and typical behaviour. It all depends on the context!

Will

Three...two...one! Well, now that's... two minutes! Well, well done. 40 quarters of a point for you. On to round two. 'Can' is not often used to refer to an action happening at the moment of speaking, but it can be done! Which type of verb when combined with 'can' allows us to talk about certain actions happening at the moment of speaking?

Denise

I need to sit down. I can see stars. Can you hear ringing?

Will

Two very good examples, but I'm still waiting for a verb form.

Bill

Oh! Verbs of the senses!

Will

Leslie?

Leslie

Correct! The sense verbs see, hear, smell, taste and feel, are not usually used in the continuous form when referring to perception. When we want to talk about seeing or hearing at the moment of speaking, we use 'can'. For example, I can see my house from here!

Will

That's why we put you there, Leslie. Always seeing, never reaching! It keeps you hungry. Well done, Bill. Have 60 points divided by 60. Let's move on to our third round. And this question is worth a thousand points. So if you get this one, you'll probably win the game! Which word combines with 'can' to produce a verb phrase which means that a person is unable to control themselves even though they want to?

Denise

Help!

Will

No, I'm afraid that's not allowed. No matter what, I can't help.

Denise

Not 'help'. Can't help!

Will

Exactly! Bill?

Bill

The verb phrase is 'can't help'

Will

Excellent! Can you give us an example?

Bill

I can't help eating the occasional slice of cake.

Will

Gosh! I haven't had cake since... but that was such a long time ago. Leslie?

Leslie

Well done! The verb phrase 'can't help' means that despite trying, a person is unable to resist doing something. For example, I can't help calling towards my house, even though I know, they can't hear me.

Will

You do make a racket Leslie! It's like music to my ears. And that brings us to the end of today's Grammar Gameshow. Let's count out the points. And the winner is... Bill! Well done! Here's what you've won!

Leslie

It's a candy cane!

Will

We'll see you again next week, where you can play for another prize. And Denise, your can-do attitude almost saw you through. Anything to say?

Denise

Help?

Will

Sorry. I can't help. Fire the cannons! It looks like we'll need another contestant. Thanks for joining us. Say goodbye, Leslie.

Leslie

Na shledanou, Leslie.

Will

See you next time.